

Education and technology: Key issues and debates

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For readers interested in EdTech (educational technology), Neil Selwyn's name is most likely known from numerous articles, books and other types of communication. Unlike many contemporary authors in the field, Selwyn has always aimed to problematise EdTech, to challenge common assumptions around it and to direct us to think more deeply about these matters. This is also the core of his book *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates*.

This is the third edition of the book, which originally came out in 2011. Many developments have taken place in EdTech in ten years. One of the biggest is most likely the rise of learning analytics and the use of data, algorithms and artificial intelligence in education. Selwyn has engaged with these topics outside this book (Selwyn 2019a), also with communities who might sometimes appear more keen to merely develop these technologies instead of critically examining the possible problems and challenges they might impose on us (Selwyn 2019b).

Overall, the book aims to provide “a balanced perspective on the potential benefits and presumed transformations of technology” (p. 10). It takes a sociotechnical approach to technology, which means that technology is understood not as something neutral, but as something that is entangled with contexts, material, social and political realities, and therefore wider society. In addition to this, the book also brings in feminist perspectives when thinking about technology in education.

Compared to the original edition, this one has been edited to fit the educational landscape of the 2020s. The chapters have been revised and there is an entirely new chapter about Artificial Intelligence and the Automation of Education. The book has a clear structure

beginning with upper-level concepts by asking, what do we mean by “education” and “technology”? and connecting technology with different learning theories. There is also a short history on EdTech. The following chapters place technology in context and discuss it with regard to educational institutions and the role of the teacher. The book ends by looking at the future of education and technology, also raising questions about climate crisis and environmental problems which are too often brushed aside when focusing only on searching for the benefits of emerging technologies. The book also has a useful and succinct glossary at the end. People who are not technology-oriented might struggle with discussing digitalisation and especially datafication of education. This is often a matter of language and trying to keep up with the rapidly changing concepts and terms. The glossary will prove useful for such readers.

Throughout the book, the key message is that we need to think carefully about implementing technology in education. The pull of emerging digital technologies is so strong that we need critical thinking that helps us consider technologies more broadly. As such, the book can be seen as an implicit counterattack against technological determinism. All the chapters end with “Further questions to consider” about the implementation of technology in education. For example, the final chapter directs readers to evaluate their own values in connection to technology. This could be seen as one of the weaknesses or contradictions of the book, and its usefulness can be debated. Although Selwyn adopts a sociotechnical approach that views technology in education as something affected by and related to wider society, he does not explicitly express what many critical voices have written about education, i.e. that our classrooms, schools and education in general are impacted by neoliberal values and aims (Holborow 2016). In short, these aims treat education as a tool for developing individuals for a job and not for life. To slightly cut corners, like pragmatism, neoliberalism is merely interested in what works for its aims. Thus, it affects what kind of language is used and what is seen as valuable in education. As such, “Further questions to consider” might not direct readers to think about such matters critically. Perhaps naively, the book trusts the reader to have the capacity to reflect their own values, and to change them. One could be sceptical about this.

Despite this criticism, the book is most likely valuable for people who work in education and want to understand the role of (digital) technology in it and how to implement it. Some sections can feel slightly abstract to those who might be looking for quick answers amongst rapidly evolving technologies, but they too will benefit from reading the book and carefully reflecting its key messages. The book covers a lot of ground and will be useful to

anyone brave enough to explore beyond the uncritical “there is huge potential in EdTech” hype to reach a deeper understanding of technology in education.

References

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