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**Digital developments in higher education,
edited by Peter Roberts and Mark Chambers [book review]**

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Two contrasting views of digital technologies in higher education stand out. One, heard often in popular media and among university administrators or corporate promoters of e-learning, is that these technologies represent a future that is progressive, innovative, and flexible, thereby enabling a more open and advanced process of teaching and learning. A second view, which contrasts sharply with that large-scale vision, reflects a common personal reluctance to engage with digital learning, and highlights the effort required for meaningful use of new technologies, amplified by a skepticism about the purported benefits.

In *Digital Developments in Higher Education: Theory and Practice*, Peter Roberts and Mark Chambers bring together an excellent set of contributions about emerging digital technologies to address what they describe as the “opportunities and challenges for academics, students, administrators, and others involved in higher education” (p. 1). Their introduction develops the theme of contrasting views, one in which there are opportunities and challenges, hyperbole and critical assessment, dismissal and recognition of change, and, as stated in the title, theory and practice. The collection of chapters to follow is unusual in that it addresses both sides of these debates, with rich examples and perceptive interpretations. Few other books offer such well-developed critical analyses along with the firsthand accounts one sees here.

The contributors to this book are able to speak from extensive direct experience in which they have seen both the promises in areas of publishing, teaching and learning, and collaboration, as well as the difficulties and the unintended effects. They also see the ways in which the same technologies are used for competing ends, such as for authoritarian control versus democratization. On the whole, they reject both of the prominent views of digital technologies in higher education described above.

Some contributors challenge the rosy view of digital technologies as simply fulfilling the promise of universities. For example, Tim Luke’s analysis of market imperatives shows how in computer-mediated distance education the “mode of information as well as the mode of production are reshaping, in a raw and rapid way, the mode of instruction around profit-seeking” (p. 19). Richard Bagnall pursues a related theme as he asks whether the “instrumental commodification of knowledge and curricula [associated with virtualization] presupposes the construction of education as a private, rather than a public good” (p. 29).

Chapters that focus more directly on particular experiences in teaching or collaboration challenge the second common view, that an inordinate effort is required to make meaningful use of new technologies and that the benefits are illusory. Although every description of practice

emphasizes the work and planning involved, the general theme is that it is all worthwhile. Pamela Gay, for example, says, “e-mail writing encouraged students to engage in what Freire called ‘authentic dialogue’” (p. 113) and “I realised back in 1989 that I could not return to teaching in a conventional classroom” (p. 121). Cathy Gunn and John Barnett report that their online course promoted deep learning, flexibility, an interactive environment, and “formation of relationships and communication with other students” (p. 148).

Thus, there are two parallel conversations here. In one, critics problematize the move to digital technologies. They question not only the benefits but also the underlying motivations and the complex of interests served by digitization. They also examine the epistemological and ethical dimensions of the move to digital learning. In the other conversation, authors representing their own practices analyze the process of change. On the whole, they tell stories of struggle, but a struggle that yields outcomes well worth the effort. They, too, refute commonly held assumptions about new technologies as both more work and less effective pedagogically.

If we accept the arguments in these chapters, and I believe they are persuasive, then we find a complete shift from the common view. Where before we had ideal technologies and reluctant people, we now have problematic technologies and enthusiastic users. Such a shift is beneficial: It positions us to ask sharper questions about costs and consequences of the move to digital teaching and learning, while simultaneously inviting us to be more open to the potentials.

But a difficulty remains: Although the two conversations can in principle proceed in parallel, it is frustrating not to have more of a resolution. Who is right, the critics or the enthusiasts? Although Roberts and Chambers’s book seeks to avoid that simple dichotomy, pointing to Lyotard’s argument about multiple possibilities of new technologies, it also plays into it, through the subtitle “Theory and Practice” and through the positioning of some chapters as more critical/theoretical and others as more pedagogical. As a consequence, there is little synthesis of competing visions. For example, Gunn and Barnett say the “biggest challenge yet to be faced is changing traditional values that put the teacher, as instructor, at the centre of the learning arena” (p. 156), whereas Bagnall sees learner-centeredness as “counter-ethical” (p. 31), because it abrogates the teacher’s responsibilities, promotes self-interest, and denies access to other realms of knowledge. Similarly, Chambers and Atkins’s positive portrayal at the end of the book of Comenius’s *Pampaedia* (in which the 17th-century writer argues for universal education to be achieved through international academic discourse) contrasts with Luke’s critique of global branding of education in the beginning.

Educators find themselves faced repeatedly with the evaluation question: Is this tool good for my university, my course, my students, for me? In such a case we tend to see the technology as a thing, with inherent, fixed affordances and constraints, albeit multiple ones. When the question is framed in such a way we inevitably find conflicting answers: The tool promotes individualization of learning, and it does not. That individualization is good, and it is not good. Education is changed for the better, and it is not.

A more productive framing may be to see technology not as “technology” but as the means for resolving a problematic situation, as in the theory of *pragmatic technology* (Burke et al., 2002; Hickman, 1990; Menand, 2001). Although the present book does not adopt that particular terminology, it does provide a rich set of examples of the ways in which technologies

are created, modified, and adapted to serve diverse needs. Technologies are conceptualized as mutually constitutive elements of social systems, which are shaped by ongoing interests, needs, beliefs, and values. As such, it makes an important contribution to the continuing discussions about developments of technology in education.

References

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