



University of Brighton



Critical Perspectives on Educational Technology

Provocation Paper

“Schooling Technologies, Techno-romanticism and False Promise: The Ideological Construction of Educational Technologies and the Paucity of Critical Perspectives”

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Are perceptions of the innovative use of educational technology over-hyped and misguided?

There is certainly plenty of evidence out there to suggest this may be the case. However, you have to look for it. Not because it is hidden, nor because it is of poor quality, but rather because it is seldom what people wish to see. This is particularly true of those who have invested professionally, politically, personally, or commercially in educational technologies.

Despite all the clamour and glamour associated with educational technology, there is also a wealth of evidence, suggesting that overall there is little innovative use of technology, especially when considered in relation to the huge investments made. What the evidence does show, should people compelled to search for it, are the common barriers reducing the potential for innovation, such as lack of time, space, demands and requirements of curricula, assessment, examinations, reporting and monitoring, and a lack of a wider culture of innovation and risk taking. These factors are conveniently overlooked or washed over by policy makers who repeatedly frame technology as a cure for ‘educational efficiency ills’, which ironically, no number of fancy gadgets can address. Much of the really innovative, creative and empowering uses of technology by young people occur in the margins, where structuring effects of structures can be avoided, and where there is greater scope for rethinking pedagogical practices.

However, maybe innovation is not the real point here. Perhaps technology has been, will continue to be, and perhaps 'needs' to be, 'harnessed' to make existing approaches more efficient. Given the prevalent structures, systems, methods of accountability and performativity that pervade our education system, it is hardly surprising that we do not see extensive creative and innovative practice. The practicalities of day to day 'schooling' negate possibilities and regulate and structure educational technology to often little more than the digitisation of existing practice, playing as much a role in the further rationalisation of 'schooling' rather than education and its related monitoring and control exercises.

Schools, Universities, local authorities and others, have made, and continue to make, huge investments in technology, often without clear and robust evidence of any impacts, or without detailed analysis of the conditions under which most significant effects might occur. The £5 billion plus of state spending on educational technology infrastructure alone under New Labour between 1997 and 2007, did not realise the often heralded transformation of education, nor did the huge investments made by educational institutions, agencies and other bodies over the same period on software, hardware, content, and so forth.

In reality, associated policies provided a veneer of modernisation but did little to transform education. How could it? Over the same period, we have seen the intensification of neo liberal reforms aimed at increasingly prescribing, defining and measuring practices, against a set of decontextualized learning outcomes and through obsessive accountability systems and processes based on 'best practices' and performativity. A wider range of private interests entered the growing educational technology marketplace to provide services, advice and partnerships that, in order to become profitable in the newly stimulated marketplace, were often designed to service the system and hence nullified many of the possibilities for learning in new and dynamic ways. In short, the very structures of a system whose supporting discourse promoted 'transformation' and innovation, in reality restricted and regulated the possibilities for transformative practice.

Before the educational technology 'boom' years, there was a far higher proportional instance of critical theory and research in the field, which highlighted, and perhaps warned of: 'techno-romanticism'; deskilling and intensification of work; the socially constructed nature of educational technology; the symbolic violence and ideology underpinning its introduction, use and proliferation; as well as inequalities along a number of dimensions in terms of access, use, effective application and utilisation in other fields, structures and systems where ownership of economic, social and cultural capitals are key mediating factors. Yet, whilst the research, broader evidence and discourse surrounding ICT has grown on a scale proportional to the investment in technology in schools, critical perspectives have disproportionately diminished as practitioners, researchers, the media, 'futurologists', gurus and evangelist engage, often inadvertently, in a process of 'storytelling' that distorts reality and further promotes 'the (false) promise' of educational technology.

The 'evidence' base and discourse underpinning general perceptions is not only distorted, overlooking the wider conditions and influences in the social construction of educational technology, it is also devoid of analysis of wider historical and ideological conditions framing its construction, and as such, simultaneously accepts and justifies the orientating 'logic'. That logic is one framed by broader neo liberal ideology, which both objectively and subjectively, shapes what education is perceived to be for, how it is measured, and the role educational technology plays in this wider process. Educational technology, as with education itself, is a socially constructed process, not an ahistorical, apolitical or benign outcome.

Earlier theories highlighting the symbolic appropriation and symbolic violence related to the further vocationalisation and economic instrumentalisation of education through the incorporation of new technologies, have perhaps been justified, as we increasingly see accompanying discourse highlighting educational technologies role in ensuring economic competitiveness. Within the wider context, the symbolic appropriation of new technologies conveys a wider modernising intent, which may seem logical and difficult to challenge, yet it also conveys an ideologically informed assumptions about the nature and purpose of education. The wider promise of transformation might well have turned out to be hollow, but by 2008, the overstated claims that somehow educational technology might help the country's economic growth and competitiveness, also seemed extreme folly. No amount of investment over such a period could account for the external factors that led to the global economic slump, nor address the wider factors contributing to it.

As we enter a new age and 'discourse' of austerity, educational technology policy, as with education itself, has again been reconstituted and framed by the wider needs of neo-liberal elites trying to resurrect the capitalist phoenix from its self-induced ashes. New Labour's 'legacy' was hastily burnt in the bonfire of the quangos, and with it many tax payer funded resources, as the Conservative Party led coalition began reshaping educational technology in the 'reconstituted neo liberal period'.

The disapplication of ICT and the promotion of Computer Science is fraught with dangers associated with structuring inequalities in favour of those groups, schools and individuals who have a greater potential to harness its credential viability through differential resources in a competitive marketplace. Furthermore, the accompanying and deeper lunge toward the 'autonomy and choice' agenda in educational policy in general, was supported by largely bypassing the research evidence and educational technology research community in favour of selective 'evidence' to justify a broader ideological intent, masked by the perceived 'necessities of austerity'. For example, the selective and spurious use of 'evidence' to drive the agenda for change saw texts such as Moe & Chubb's 'Liberating Learning', - elsewhere described as polemical and technologically determinist in nature as it uncritically accepts technological development as a wholly positive force', - utilised to construct an argument to support policy direction. Yet, such texts are also inherently ideological in nature,

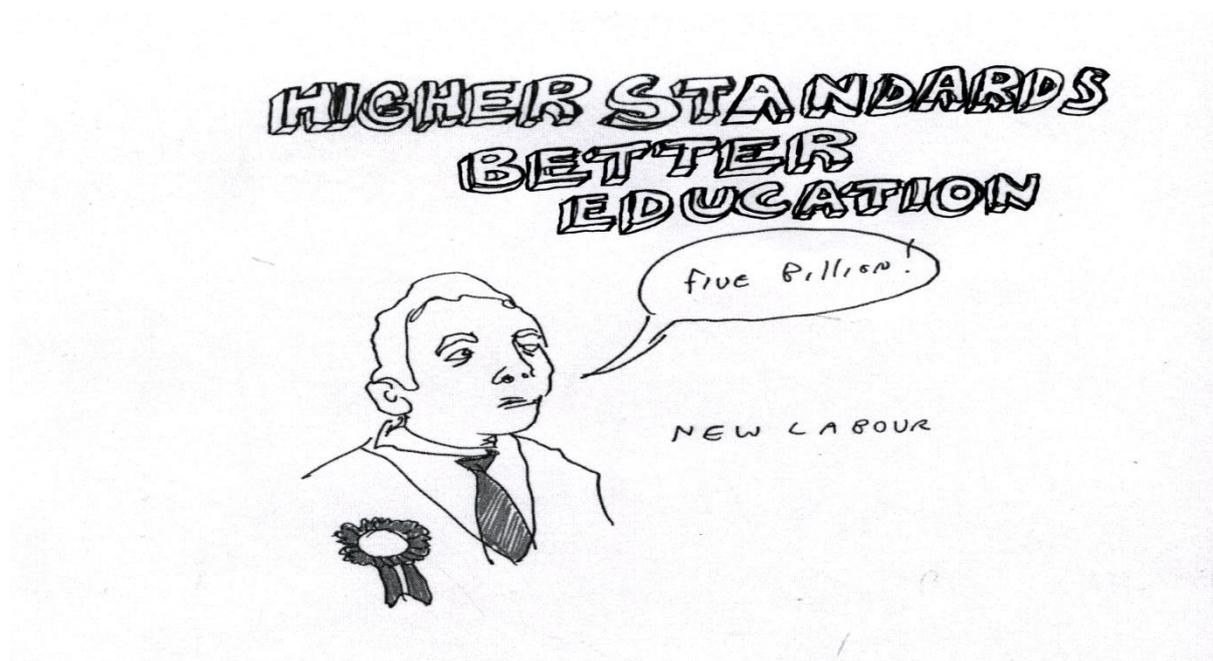
foregrounding the drive for systemic change 'for fear of being left behind in the global economy', and constructing false juxtapositions between the innovative power of technology against those 'entrenched interests' perpetuating the 'status quo'. Written by the same authors who wrote 'Politics, Markets and American Schools', it may be unsurprising that one of the authors is actively involved in a senior capacity for a major educational services market provider with a vested interest in opening up markets to the private sector.

So, there is clearly a need to take a step back and examine educational technology policy and practice through a much more critical lens and to consider it in its wider cultural and structural relationship to systems and ideological discourse. Perhaps these serve merely as 'schooling technologies' rather than really 'liberating learning' from the ideological logic that itself undermines innovation, creativity and critically in education and learning.

Despite how it is likely to be perceived, this provocation paper is not an anti-technology argument. Rather it is a call for more critical perspectives to highlight the myths and exaggerations, to focus on different measures of benefits and alternative outcomes of learning, and to focus on the wider conditions, pedagogies and contexts underpinning its application. Ultimately, it is a call for researchers and educators to play an active role in socially constructing educational technology 'otherwise', liberated from the wider 'hegemonic newspeak'.

Disclaimer:

This provocation paper was written to stimulate debate at the 'critical perspectives on educational technology' event at the University of Brighton on October 15th 2013. It is clearly neither comprehensive, nor does it necessarily reflect the views of the author, rather it is written solely as a 'stimulus document' to support and set a broader context for discussions.



MARKET IDEOLOGY

language of threats to education

We are being schooled towards
the needs of the market.



We really have
to become more
critical of
education
technology