

BOOK REVIEW

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Technology: Taking the Distance Out of Learning, by Margit Misangyi Watts (Ed.), New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 94

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Revolution or evolution? The debate continues concerning what role technology should have in education and, more specifically, distance education. Such questions are considered in the monograph titled “Technology: Taking the Distance Out of Learning,” part of the *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* series. With the recent flood of technological innovations and the popularization of distance learning, education has struggled to know whether to embrace or eschew distance education models and technologies.

The editor of this journal, Margit Misangyi Watts, introduced this question as her focus and thesis for this volume: “Why should we include distance or distributed learning modalities in the delivery of education?” (2003). This monograph seeks to answer this fundamental query, outlining superficial motivations and compelling reasons to adopt, and sometimes reject, the distance learning modalities which almost always include technology. Each chapter of the volume focuses on a different aspect of technology, bringing perspectives from public education, higher education, and the corporate sector. The text combines the viewpoints of many authors and provides tangible evidence that technology is affecting different facets of learning and will continue to do so.

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It is important to note that the *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* series is not a highly esoteric scholarly journal; the writing style is nontechnical and references are minimal. Thus, although a number of the arguments in *Technology* seemed to be at the surface level without evidential support, the lack of emphasis and depth could be a function of the series' style and approach. The series' intent is to proffer informal perspectives and opinions on the practical issues that impact faculty members and their students.

The title of the monograph deserves closer scrutiny. At first glance, it implies that the volume will explain how technology mitigates challenges posed by distance learning. However, contrary to what the title may imply, many of the chapters actually make the counterargument, outlining the deficiencies of distance education, especially compared to "traditional education." A more fitting title might have been, *Technology: Putting the Distance in Learning?* Not all of the authors, however, held these views.

At the beginning of the manuscript, the editor, Margit Watts, explains how technology can serve as a catalyst or lever for educational reform. We concur with Watts' pragmatic approach and have observed technology serve as the impetus for helping faculty examine and improve their teaching at numerous institutions. The infusion of technology can cause instructors to rethink their goals, methods, activities, and assessment measures. As Watts contends, "The conversation needs to take the leap from the question, 'What kind of software is that?' to the question, 'What kind of critical thinking skills are being developed by the use of that software?'" (p. 6). This idea of technology as catalyst was introduced in Ehrmann and Chickering's article, "Technology as a Lever" (1996), an adaptation of Chickering's seminal work in 1987, "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education." Unfortunately, too many faculty shy away from using technology, not because they think technology is good or bad, but because they do not

want to critically review their teaching practices.

Watts' initial chapter is essential in helping readers see the common threads and purposes that run throughout the rest of the chapters. For example, she explains her perspectives on how the chapters on service learning and text immersion are related to technology, a connection that might otherwise be difficult for the reader to make. A theme extending throughout much of the volume is that of using new metaphors in discussing technology. The most striking example is Megumi Taniguchi's piece titled "Internet Metaphors Matter," in which she outlines the deficiencies in the following prevalent metaphors: the "Web," the "Global Village," the "Information Superhighway," and "surfing the net." She argues that the first two metaphors convey a connectedness that isn't always achieved on the Internet and that the second two suggest reckless activities that may lack focus or direction. We agree that the Superhighway may have "more dead ends, roadblocks, and construction projects than most people realize" (p. 17), but the places one can go on such a "road" were probably inaccessible and unimaginable to many people who otherwise would not have had the opportunity for continuing education a decade ago. One of the alternate metaphors Taniguchi suggests for the Internet is that of a "trail," a comparison that we found quite apt. The use of "trail" captures the searching aspect of using the Internet more appropriately than other metaphors. A trail can also be well traveled and clearly marked, just as it can be less traveled and unproven, a difference that mirrors the diversity and level of quality found on the Web.

This volume of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* is unique in that the editor included two interviews of individuals with diverse perspectives on technological advances. The first interview, a conversation with Kevin Kelly, editor of *Wired Magazine*, is interesting and well written. He suggests that by understanding the larger context in which higher education exists, a clearer view of the

relationship between technology, society, and higher education emerges. Kelly takes a very pragmatic approach to technology and education, suggesting that if schools have extra funds they can include computers in the process; if funds are a problem, they should not worry about the lack of computers. Kelly explains that schools can only do so much and that the family is responsible to compensate for any institutional deficiencies. Ironically, the article ends with the revelation that Kelly has neither a TV in his home nor does he carry a cell phone, so he probably would also advise discretion in the personal use of technology.

The second interview between the editor and one of the virtual community pioneers, Howard Rheingold, focuses on how technology can place, instead of remove, distance in learning. Rheingold expresses significant pessimism toward the future as he predicts that technology will replace reality with artificiality and result in an eventual cataclysm. His concerns about excessive homogeneity, too many trees disappearing, and too much reality being lost as technology becomes more prevalent seem a bit overstated. We acknowledge that technology adoption has caused some problems, but we would suggest it has also solved many problems and that the good outweighs the bad. A number of other sections in the monograph are noteworthy. In a chapter by Barry M. Maid titled "No Magic Answers," the author attributes educators' current fascination with instructional technology to the hope that technology will be the panacea solving all problems in higher education. Three pervasive problems facing educational institutions are identified: insufficient funds, time-consuming change, and isolation from society. The author is clear that he doesn't have—nor does society have right now—the "magical" answer for how much technology is enough. He does suggest that after all things are considered, technology decisions should focus on how much it will help the students learn and that student learning should be the driver for all technological decisions. We echo his sentiments, though we feel that technology can

solve more problems than he would probably acknowledge.

In another chapter, Wesley Cooper (a philosophy professor), explores his personal adventure into MOO [MUD (Multiple User Domains) Object Oriented] technology that is used for language learning, computer games, and e-mail communication. MOO technology was more popular in the late 1990s, and its popularity has since been eclipsed with many Web-enabled tools that are more image-rich and less text-intensive. Cooper calls for moderation between the IT extremists and the academic Luddites, emphasizing throughout his article the need for IT to "remedy certain deficiencies in the traditional classroom" (p. 48). He also talks about increased classroom efficiency because of technology's facilitation of administrative tasks, including distributing and collecting essays, administering tests, and recording grades. Finally, the author indicates how technology has helped him to "know [his] students and how their minds work better than I once did" and then suggests that this may be a "point in favor of pure distance education" (p. 48). This chapter actually did show how technology is removing distance from some of the learning!

The next chapter, written by Stephen J. Romanoff, focuses on the use of learning technologies to facilitate a learning community between college students in Hawaii and Maine. The author argues that "the absence of an in-person, face-to-face classroom experience is less important than the presence of a learning experience that affirms the individual and the collective efforts of students and teachers" (p. 58), a position we strongly support. However, there were a number of areas in this chapter that we found lacking. The case study, technological tools, and bibliography were dated, since this case occurred in the spring of 1999. The case study also appeared to sidestep the question of whether the learning community really made a difference for the students in Maine and Hawaii, and if so, how? It was unclear why collaboration across the country was necessary. Again, using technology for

technology's sake doesn't make sense unless there is a pedagogical purpose or research question for doing so.

In the book's final chapter, Watts concludes by admonishing readers to not use technology for technology's sake, but to utilize it as another tool in the hands of a grounded and mature educator. She talks about what it means to be an educated person, the importance of a liberal education, and some recent contributions to epistemology. She also expresses concern that the true meaning of education is being lost in today's world as everyone chases technological answers for nontechnological questions. She does acknowledge the possibility that the "Web and other Internet technologies can help us create learning environments that not only are constructivist in nature but also enhance our relationship to students" (p. 100).

In contrast to this position, however, Watts critically observes that it is "interesting that many universities around the country are transforming their undergraduate programs to personalize the academic experience, yet, simultaneously, they are developing online courses that aim to disseminate information quickly, efficiently, and not necessarily personally" (p. 98). While some courses certainly reflect the lack of interpersonal contact that Watts suggests, it is important also to recognize the online courses with strong student-faculty and student-student contact that otherwise would not be possible without technol-

ogy. Watts seems unconvinced of the ability of technology to mediate meaningful relationships, a perspective that she passes to the reader despite her attempts to describe technology's strengths. Her expertise is information literacy, not distance education, and at times it appears that the focus is more on information literacy than it is on technology taking the distance out of learning. An example of this tendency is the chapter written by the editor's librarian and colleague, Randy Burke Hensley, about recent challenges the information explosion has caused for libraries and librarians and the claim that "an information-literate person is an educated person" (p. 29).

In summary, Watts' final chapter, and the book in general, assign technology to its rightful role as an invaluable tool in the hands of a skilled educational artisan. The greatest contribution this text may make to the literature is its analysis of the timely and critical issues and questions about the appropriate integrations of technology into the education experience through the eyes of its diverse contributors: philosophers, librarians, technologists, scholars, and teachers. A chapter title in the book summarizes this monograph best: "no magic answers."

REFERENCE

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