There are any number of reasons to get excited about the potential of tablets in K-12; cost of device per student, a reduced level of cognitive demands in the interface, improved relative durability, lower cost of content, and the potential for working in groups in ways heretofore unexplored. But of course, tablets like the iPad are not the first shiny new technology to stoke the fires of educational technologists. The idea that personal digital assistants, or PDAs, like Palm Pilots, Apple’s Newton, and eMate would fuel a revolution in educational settings was matched and in some cases exceeded by expectations in industry or healthcare for these technologies. Some technologies like the Segway, for example, gently glided back to earth, while others, like the Pilot, burned up upon re-entry. The historical failure of technologies to meet the high expectations of proponents is perhaps most visible in education for several reason. The most prominent is likely the public nature of the discourse about what works and what doesn’t, particularly as it relates to identifiable line items in school budgets.

While a part of the failure to make much of an impact can be attributed to outsized expectations and promises; perhaps, the most important issue related to the success or failure of innovations to transform human practices has much to do with understanding cycles of adoption and the lack of a set of useful conversations centered in actual use. We forget, or are frequently so blinded or distracted by the shine of innovations that grounding or anchoring them in a relevant context rarely occurs. Often, the idea is that innovations will be the spark that ignites a revolution. History however has other things to say about the sparks and fuel for revolution. Technology, to be sure, can and has played important roles (both good and ill, depending on your perspective) in revolutions. It is its use in a practical sense and in a social and contextual sense that makes the difference.

This book, and the chapters within it, is an attempt to begin to open a dialog by offering theories and examples of use cases within the context of K-12 education.

Orrin T. Murray  
The University of Chicago, USA