As its title suggests, ‘Looking toward the future of technology-enhanced education’ is a book that sets itself a very important – but very difficult – brief. Commenting on the future of education and technology is a perilous pastime. Even the most informed commentators find technological forecasting to be a tricky business. Take, for instance, the assertion in 1943 that there only would ever be ‘a world market for maybe five computers’ (a quotation attributed to Thomas J Watson - then Chairman of IBM). Or fifty years later when the internet was dismissed by Bill Gates as ‘a passing fad’. It seems that even those who are involved deeply in the development of new technology are reduced to guessing games when it comes to predicting the near future. In the same vein, the nature of educational change has proved to be just as difficult to forecast accurately – as is now evident in the many extravagant depictions of the ‘classroom of 2000’ offered throughout the second half of the twentieth century. All told, predicting the future forms and features of technology-enhanced education can be a thankless task.

This is not to say that efforts should not be made by education technologists to look forward toward the future. Indeed, all of the contributors to this book should be commended for engaging with the difficult questions that such forward thinking entails and providing a well-rounded and well-informed set of responses. The chapters in this collection manage to cover an impressive range of what could be considered to be ‘state-of-the-art’ education technologies – from virtual learning environments, wiki technologies and virtual conferencing, to open resources, mobile learning and serious games. Pleasingly, many of the chapters also pay attention to human aspects of education technology use. In this sense, the book offers a varied perspective on education, covering subjects such as civil engineering, physical education and cultural studies considering the learning that takes place in schools, colleges and universities, as well as episodes of ‘informal’ learning that occur outside the aegis of any education institution. This focus on the ‘wetware’ as well as the ‘software’ aspects of education technology is also apparent in chapters on user-centred design, new information competencies, media literacies, and using technology to engage with upcoming generations of young learners (or as one of the final chapters terms it, ‘harnessing the drive to learn in members of ‘Generation Me’”).

This reference to Generation Me highlights an important theme that runs throughout the book – i.e. the notion that the education establishment is facing a growing disconnection from those that it seeks to work with. The potential distancing between institution and individual is perhaps the most important question that this book raises, and is certainly an issue that should be at the forefront of any reader’s mind when reviewing these chapters. In particular, much of this book’s content chimes with the general concerns within educational circles over new generations of learners who could be characterised as ‘digital natives’ – i.e. individuals who are seen to be natural technology users as a result of their early development and immersion in all things digital. These are learners, as Palfrey and Gasser (2008) put it,
who many people consider to have been ‘born digital.’ As some of the contributors to this book imply, many educators feel that significant divisions that are arising between current generations of learners and their educational institutions. Some of the chapters in this book echo Marc Prensky’s (2001, p.1) warning from the beginning of the century that “today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach”. Thus one of the main questions that any reader of this book should bear in mind is how the described forms of technology-enhanced education may work to lessen this perceived gap. In other words, what is being suggested in these chapters that offers a break from the perennial cycles of hype, hope and disappointment which have blighted the institutional use of education technologies over the last thirty years? What is it about the technologies and practices described in this book that may help future education technologies buck the trend described so deftly in Larry Cuban’s (1993) prognosis of ‘computer meets classroom: classroom wins’? How will the use of these particular technologies in educational settings play out in practice as well as in potential?

In fact, once having read these chapters I would encourage any reader to move their attention away from the state-of-the-art and back towards what could be termed the ‘state-of-the-actual’. As an academic ‘tribe’, education technologists certainly thrive on taking a forward-looking and fast-changing perspective – asking questions that are concerned primarily with what should happen, and what could happen once new technologies and digital media are placed into educational settings. Whilst these concerns are all well and good, the job for any reader of this book is to give some serious thought to how these artefacts and activities may be best integrated into the present-day realities of educational institutions and learners. In short, it seems appropriate that readers of this book are inspired to also ask questions concerning what is actually taking place when these education technologies meet education institutions – to look beyond the future of technology-enhanced education and back towards the present.

From this perspective there are many questions that need to be asked of the present state of technology-enhanced education. For instance, basic questions of equality and diversity remain concerning who is actually able to do what with these technologies, why and with what outcomes. Similarly, questions can be raised about the ends as well as the means of these forms of technology-enhanced learning. For example, what learning can actually be said to result from the use of these technologies and tools in education settings? What are the unintended and unexpected consequences of technology-enhanced education – its seductions and pleasures as well as its problems and anxieties? Above all, serious thought needs to be given to what really can be said to be ‘new’ about these emerging forms of technology-enhanced education – i.e. what are these artefacts and activities making possible that were not possible before; how are social relations being altered (if at all)? Can these forms of technology-enhanced education really be seen to constitute a new educational landscape, or do they more accurately represent a set of continuities from previous eras?

I expect that ‘Looking toward the future of technology-enhanced education’ will provide much to inspire and interest any reader. Of course, no-one will agree with everything that is written in the book – there would surely be something wrong with either the reader or the book if this were the case! Yet agreeable or not, I am sure that these essays will provoke much thought and further discussion about technology-enhanced education.

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REFERENCES


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