

BOOK REVIEW

From Blogs to Bombs: The Future of Digital Technologies in Education

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Mark Pegrum

*From Blogs to Bombs: The Future of Digital
Technologies in Education*

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From Blogs to Bombs describes a five lens model which places digital technologies in a wider international context alongside prominent issues of concern such as environmentalism, warfare and the future of democracy. In Pegrum's words:

The model ... is a reminder that the issues which have an impact on digital technologies in education – that is, education through and simultaneously about digital technologies – run from blogs to bombs, from technology to politics and back again ... It's a reminder that we need to develop a more holistic view of digital technologies (p. 10).

As indicated by the book's sub-heading, 'The Future of Digital technologies in Education', this is not a book about presenting blueprints but rather about alerting readers to the issues involved and the different possible outcomes. It is written in an accessible style with many well-sourced anecdotes and apposite statistics about the increasingly digital world we inhabit. In essence the book is a polemic and a call to action to resist the forces of state and corporate conservatism that would impose filtered, vetted, closed and centrally determined content and technology. That call to action is aimed directly at educators, who Pegrum sees as the main hope of providing a collaborative future using collective intelligence for the greater good of mankind and the environment.

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The book introduces readers first to the five lens model as a whole and in subsequent chapters explores each of the lenses in more detail.

Through the first technological lens, Pegrum takes us on a tour of a cloudy sky; a neat metaphor which begins with the promise of technology sending us to 'cloud nine', continues with the storm clouds of rapid change enabled by digital technologies and characterised by a state of perpetual beta, before continuing with the latest cloud computing trend in the shape of collaborative Web 2.0 tools.

This metaphor describes the raw materials that educators have at their disposal. These are no longer merely an enormous library of information but also include the opportunities to produce, mash-up, collaborate and communicate with a wide range of people independent of location. The chapter examines the fit between the currently dominant social constructivist paradigm in education and the Web 2.0 tools that enable its implementation. This paradigm puts the learner at the centre and leads to a bifurcation of paths, with the walled garden approach on one side where content is prepared and vetted beforehand and the wild frontier on the other side where the chances of creativity and engagement are higher but so also are the risks of vandalism and inappropriate content. Pegrum concludes that the Internet will ultimately become a utility like any other, such as electricity, not worthy of separate consideration as for example in Finland, where the right to fast Internet access is already enshrined in law (Ahmed, 2009).

Through the pedagogical lens, the social constructivist paradigm is explored in more depth. Pegrum notes that digital technologies can also easily support traditional pedagogical paradigms such as the automation of information transmission, leading to entrenched positions: 'Debates which appear to be about technology, or for that matter about education, often reflect deep-seated social beliefs and far-reaching political agendas' (p. 26).

Information retrieval and evaluation matters more now than retention and Pegrum shows how Web 2.0 tools support social con-

structivism, ultimately leading to the possibility of personal learning environments (PLE). He also makes a case for the legitimacy of collective intelligence, illustrated by the example of an examination in Australia during which the examinees were allowed to use the Internet or even 'phone a friend' on their mobile phones, an approach more closely mirroring the crowdsourcing of page ranks on Google, Digg or Reddit for example. The open source movement of voluntary effort is also evidence that the traditional transmission models are no longer valid and the upsurge of user-generated content (UGC), most notably in sites such as YouTube, is seen as a return to an earlier norm of UGC before the era of mass media. In the wiki model, truth is provisional and authority is distributed and earned (e.g., Wikipedia). So students will be less willing to acquiesce in the transmission approach. Back in the classroom this points to a revised role for the teacher as facilitator.

The chapter continues with a forceful case for the extension of our understanding of literacy to cover much more than simply understanding text. Multi-literacies include print but also search, information, participatory, digital, remix, personal, intercultural, technology and texting literacies. The chapter ends by considering what could go wrong with such a scenario, noting the increasing centralisation and standardisation of educational systems as well as the de-professionalization of teachers. Pegrum makes the case for the remaining chapters thus: 'Educators need a clear sense of the social, socio-political and ecological embeddedness of technology... in order to incorporate it effectively in their own teaching' (p. 53).

The third lens is social and deals with digital identity and how to manage it. Pegrum begins by questioning the myth of the techno-savvy net generation, presenting evidence that the situation is much more nuanced and that there is a real need for guidance from educators to help young people manage their online digital identities. Looking through the social lens also brings us to a consideration of the dangers of digital technologies that range from cyberporn

to cyberbullying as well as the risk of social isolation. The overwhelming conclusion from this chapter is that young people need guidance and mentoring as they navigate these new challenges for which there are as yet no established solutions.

The fourth lens concerns wider political issues such as the need for active promotion of digital literacy to counteract racist and other hate-related content and that the voices from the West tend not to be representative, coming as they do from the affluent, urban population. Pegrum invites readers to examine the values propagated by the Open Source movement and by those whose aim it is to commodify education into products and customers. There is the potential for a positive effect from global encounters but this has to be actively mediated by, for example, teachers. Technologies make it harder to silence the voices of dissent and participatory democracy is actively supported in places such as the UK and USA. In economics new business models are emerging where 'you are what you share' and value lies in the network, but the network cannot stand alone and sometimes governments need to police the network, particularly when it is promoting terrorism for example. Finding the right balance of control is difficult, however, and the proposed Australian censorship laws that would ban over 10,000 websites have been widely condemned. There is also evidence of states and businesses colluding to hang on to out-dated business models such as the huge extension of copyright periods. Lawrence Lessig suggests that this will criminalise a whole generation and lead to consequences reminiscent of the prohibition era in the US. The most recent threats are the tethered technologies that are a part of cloud computing, whereby the consumer does not buy the technology but only the right to use it under the terms set by the seller. The role for teachers

then is to make students aware of their potential for political engagement, to demonstrate the power of networks and to ensure that students are globally aware.

The final lens takes a global view including the health implications of overuse of the digital technologies, addiction and that multitasking may be responsible for the rise in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Pegrum also considers the potential of technology-enhanced humans and Artificial Intelligence but notes that disregarding the body in favour of the mind has dangers for health and the environment. The chapter and hence the book ends on a very spiritual note suggesting that the connectedness created by the Internet could be our salvation, with the chatter acting as an early warning system of hot spots where problems need addressing. For that to work, however, we must embrace diversity and who is better placed to promote that in a positive and collaborative way than teachers?

The main message of the book then is that the world is changing in part due to digital technologies and that educators need to change too by adopting a much-needed facilitating role, enabled by these collaborative tools. The book is international in scope and considers cross-cultural issues. While obviously being in the pro camp, it does set out the dangers inherent in the use of digital technologies and carefully documents the difficult dilemmas that teachers, parents, politicians and users will face in the near future.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2009). *Fast internet access becomes a legal right in Finland*. Retrieved December 5, 2009, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/10/15/finland.internet.rights/index.html>

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