



Education Battleground — Technology

BY LARRY KUEHN

The common story of why we need to integrate information and communications technology (ICT) into education has changed.

A dozen years ago it was largely about changing the students, preparing them to use the technology — mostly in the context of anticipated uses in the economy. Getting them job ready.

The argument is different these days. Now it is to change the schools to fit the kids. The students live in a culture immersed in technology. If the school doesn't incorporate and reflect the technology rich environment of the kids, it will seem irrelevant to them. That is the dominant story, anyway.

So what has changed? Ubiquity, for one thing. The prices have

dropped, the power has increased and at least 85% of Canadians have access to the Internet. Steve Jobs and Web 2.0 have contributed, as well. Smartphones, cameras, iPads, Google, Facebook — technology to create and participate as well as to search and find.

Every technology has embedded in it a social order, according to those who insist that we must look for that order — and decide if it is one that we want. Ursula Franklin tells us that “every tool shapes the task.”

Those who think that the established political and economic order needs to be changed can take heart from some of the events as we travel through the second decade of the 21st Century: the Arab Spring, #Occupywallstreet, flash-mobs, online petition campaigns...

These developments generate enthusiasm about changes in education among many. But not so fast. Not everyone thinks that we should abandon patterns and institutions that have served much of society for several decades. Nor should we make every school a technology immersion school without at least examining some of the complexities and consequences.

Some fields in the education battleground around technology

In thinking about this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, I took an inspiration from *Battleground Schools*. It is an encyclopaedia of conflict in education, a project of two University of British Columbia education professors, Sandra Matheson and Wayne Ross. The idea was to have short articles that frame some of the many areas of conflict over education — conflicts that grow out of social, cultural, political and technological changes and differences.

The speed and breadth of technological change and how it plays out in education is creating many battles. This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* aims to contribute to the project of identifying some of these areas of conflict and how they play out in schools and for students and teachers. Of course, the articles here represent only a few of the conflicts in education created by rapid technological and related social change.

Conflict and controversy are not bad — especially when they

are carried out as a dialogue. Sometimes controversies even produce consensus when they lead to understanding more deeply the perspectives and concerns of others. On the other hand, sometimes they reflect differences in world view that cannot be reconciled. Both are true of issues dealt with in this edition of *Our Schools*.

Nancy Knickerbocker's story about pictures from a gang rape gone viral and its tragic impact on the girl who lived it makes us realize how important it is to address morality — not just the morality of rape, but also the harm accentuated by the communication tools that are so easy to use.

The impact on human relationships is raised as well in the report on a talk by Sherry Turkle. Her concern is very much reflected in the title of her most recent book: *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*.

Not paying attention to the changes taking place will have negative consequences. This is the message from Suzanne de Castell when she writes about the use of games in education. Much of the recreational time of our students is spent on games. If we ignore this, and do not get into the development of games with educational and social value, we are abandoning our students, she tells us.

Three articles about cell phones and texting in the classroom are an indication of the

impact of ubiquity of these among our students. Stepping outside of our own reality, Pav Akhtar talks about promoting reading in South Africa where cell phones are common, but books are not.

Four articles on aspects of online responsibility and reputation point to the importance of these issues: cyber-bulling, managing your online reputation, teacher-student boundary issues using Facebook and legal issues around defamation and free expression.

Any look at technology in education these days would not be complete without including online learning. It is seen by some as a panacea. The claim is that online learning can reach students whose isolation limits their opportunities. Everyone will have to take courses online in the future, so we should require all secondary students to take at least one course to graduate. It is cheaper than face-to-face education.

While all of those may have some claim to validity, all raise serious questions as well. And regardless of whether online education is valuable or not, those who teach in these programs face demands without the boundaries of either time or place. The physical school with a timetable frames the work of teachers in a traditional face-to-face program. How can the work of the online teacher be framed to avoid impossible working conditions? If online teaching is cheaper, it is either

because it is of less quality, or because it is heavily subsidized by the working conditions of the teachers.

Noble Kelly from Education Beyond Borders expresses concerns about the widening of the divides in education and technology on a global basis. Some of the gap is a reflection of the tremendous and widening gaps in incomes between countries and among the people within countries, both developed and less developed. Kelly sees the gap growing as well when the hardware and networks are installed, but no one works with the teachers on how the technology could be used effectively.

Some of the controversies over technology are more a result of different experiences than differences of values or intentions. One way that these have been characterized has been generational differences framed as “digital natives” and “digital immigrants.” My own sense is that this characterization has almost become an excuse for some to throw up their hands and ignore issues because “I’m a digital immigrant” and don’t want to figure out how to use these technologies.

The reality is that we cannot just ignore what has become such an important part of our culture. However, we may have quite different ways of social engagement with the technology. “Resident” and “visitor” are terms that have been proposed and that make a lot of sense to me.

If every tool shapes the task, we need to spend the effort to try to understand how education is being shaped. With last year's tools being replaced by new ones this year, it has got to be an ongoing discussion and search. We should not just let tools appear and be incorporated — we must engage in shaping how the tools shape the task.

If you are interested in discussing the ideas in this issue or other elements of technology and education, I invite you to visit the Education Digicritic Blog at <http://larrykuehn.wordpress.com>.

Education and social justice

Many aspects of technology in education have a social justice element. One of the most basic is that of equity of access. When the B.C. Minister of Education announced a bring your own device (BYOD), as it has been christened — or

bring your own gadget) policy for increasing use of technology, that clearly creates a further inequity between those whose families can afford an iPad or smartphone and those who cannot.

However, that is only a current addition to the already powerful and long-established inequalities, marginalization and oppression that are felt in education. Two articles address these inequalities.

Deirdre Kelly provides a compelling set of ideas about not just talking about social justice in education, but translating the talk into classroom practice. Janet Nicol reports on the practice of teaching the new Social Justice 12 course in Vancouver secondary schools — some of the course, understandably, relates to technology, but more fundamentally to the values and actions of our students.

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I welcome feedback on this issue of Our Schools in my blog or by email at larry.kuehn@gmail.com.