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Book Review: Metaphors of Ed Tech

Author: Martin Weller (Athabasca University Press, 2022, 200 pages) <https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771993500.01>

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How often has online learning been compared to Netflix, Uber, or Amazon in the past three years of the Covid pandemic? Although Martin Weller does not answer this question quantitatively, he sets out in *Metaphors of Ed Tech* to make us aware that any metaphor is value-laden and expresses a particular perspective on a subject area or social phenomenon. But metaphors can also be useful. They encourage people to use mental models they have about things they know well to reframe their ideas about subject areas or social phenomena they do not know—or, indeed, that they are used to thinking about in a certain way. Consider the change of perspective when we use the mental model of a lecture, a newspaper, or a streaming service to review the potentials and risks of online learning. Weller refers to this practice which people use to review and construct their own perspective on the practiced relationship in an educational setting as using a “mental sandpit.”

Following from Weller’s companion publication [25 Years of Ed Tech](#) (2020), *Metaphors of Ed Tech* aims to facilitate a critical take on how educational technology (ed tech) is being used in educational settings and to help expose how the debate around these practices is framed. This objective is driven by Weller’s motivation to provide an academic method of reviewing developments in educational technology—given the current lack of agreed-upon terminologies, non-recognition of academic insights from the past, and neglect of power relationships underlying technological solutions—as well as to overcome the utilitarian way digital technology is often discussed. At the same time, Weller is wary of the idea of ed tech becoming a discipline. He argues that ed tech needs to remain more open to fully account for the dynamic and ever-changing developments in the field of digital technology and in our social relationship to digital tools. This openness will also ensure that the community is inclusive of all critical voices and does not shut these out as part of the norming processes behind creating a discipline. Weller states, “Ed tech is rich precisely because people enter it from different fields, bringing a range of perspectives to bear, and [because] it is applied to different disciplines that have their own requirements and challenges.” (p. 48) In his conclusion, he cites Watters’ (2016) argument that ed tech should remain an “undiscipline.”

Weller considers metaphors as a strong method for bringing in this range of perspectives. The question remains whether this approach works for the reader? Does it make the ideas and arguments in the book more accessible? Certainly, the book presents many common metaphors about education technology throughout. In chapter 5, for instance, some common metaphors are clustered around the idea that ed tech is the salvation from an oncoming educational apocalypse. As Weller states, the ones pushing this idea within this narrative are often given religious titles in popular parlance: they are “evangelists” who use these metaphors as a method of successfully implementing their preferred solution. In the end, however, Weller argues that it may be that the rather humdrum learning management system has the

greatest impact on access to and quality of learning, even though the evangelist is more likely to be pushing for a blockchain-based solution.

For strong proponents of open education, it certainly is helpful to hear from Weller about common metaphors used to make this seemingly esoteric and fuzzy idea (characterisation of this author, not a quote from the book) more concrete in chapter 6. For instance, Weller considers the metaphor of the educator as a DJ curating a “playlist”—a selection of different songs connected by design. With this example, as with others, Weller also reminds the reader that metaphors can become too strong, with people paying too much attention to the comparative object used instead of seeing the use of metaphor as a mapping exercise with purpose of offering a certain perspective on ed tech.

A number of metaphors strewn throughout the book are Weller’s own invention. He suggests “mudlarking” as an analogy for the undiscipline of ed tech, a Welsh castle as an analogy for reputation signalling used by new ed tech companies wanting to link to existing educational legacies, and “Jaws” (with reference to the shark) as the challenge posed by COVID-19 to a fragile educational ecosystem. These are entertaining and certainly fulfil their purpose of asking us to re-frame our perspective on phenomena in the educational system.

The final question is what impact this book could have on the field of educational technology. Weller refers to the educational technologist who needs to “appreciate what is important and useful in new technological developments and to separate them from the pro- or anti-technology rhetoric” (p. 57). While the use of metaphors certainly encourages this critical reflection process, the example of the reframing of the pedagogical concept of a massive open online course (MOOC) is perhaps the most instructive. The first waves of social research on MOOCs equated them to formal education (relating them to the metaphor of lecture or university course) and criticized their high drop-out rates. A new metaphor from Downes (2014) proposing to view MOOCs like newspapers opens up the concept and encourages rethinking what success might mean for a MOOC, and therefore how to measure impact. Thus, this book and the purposeful use of and reflection on metaphors it encourages can hopefully lead to better research and development.

References

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