

The Overselling of Ed Tech

By Alfie Kohn

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that the idea of using digital technology in the classroom tends to be either loved or hated. After all, anything that's digital consists only of ones or zeroes. By contrast, my own position is somewhere in the middle, a location where I don't often find myself, frankly. I'm not allied with the Waldorfians, who ban computers from elementary and middle schools, but neither do I have much in common with teachers whose excitement over the latest export from Silicon Valley often seems downright orgasmic.

Basically, my response to ed tech is "It depends." And one key consideration on which it depends is the reason given for supporting it.

Some people seem to be drawn to technology for its own sake — because it's cool. This strikes me as an unpersuasive reason to spend oodles of money, particularly since the excitement is generated and continually refreshed by companies that profit from it. Their ads in education periodicals, booths at conferences, and [advocacy organizations](#) are selling not only specific kinds of software but the whole idea that ed tech is de rigueur for any school that doesn't want to risk being tagged as "twentieth century."

Other people, particularly politicians, defend technology on the grounds that it will keep our students ["competitive in the global economy."](#) This catch-all justification has been invoked to support other dubious policies, including highly prescriptive, one-size-fits-all national curriculum standards. It's based on two premises: that decisions about children's learning should be driven by economic considerations, and that people in other countries should be seen primarily as rivals to be defeated.

But the rationale that I find most disturbing — despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that it's rarely made explicit — is the idea that technology will increase our efficiency . . . at teaching the same way that children have been taught for a very long time. Perhaps it hasn't escaped your notice that ed tech is passionately embraced by very traditional schools: Their institutional pulse quickens over whatever is cutting-edge: instruction that's blended, flipped, digitally personalized. This apparent paradox should give us pause. Despite corporate-style declarations about the benefits of "innovation" and "disruption," new forms of technology in the classroom mesh quite comfortably with an old-school model that consists of pouring a bunch o' facts into empty receptacles.

We can't answer the question "Is tech useful in schools?" until we've grappled with a deeper question: "What kinds of learning should be taking place in those schools?" If we favor an approach by which students actively construct meaning, an interactive process that involves a deep understanding of ideas and emerges from the interests and questions of the learners themselves, well, then we'd be open to the kinds of technology that truly support this kind of inquiry. Show me something that helps kids create, design, produce, construct — and I'm on board. Show me something that helps them make things collaboratively (rather than just on their own), and I'm even more interested — although it's important to keep in mind that meaningful learning never requires

technology, so even here we should object whenever we're told that software (or a device with a screen) is essential.

Far more common, in any case, are examples of technology that take for granted, and ultimately help to perpetuate, traditional teacher-centered instruction that consists mostly of memorizing facts and practicing skills. Tarting up a lecture with a SmartBoard, loading a textbook on an iPad, looking up facts online, rehearsing skills with an "adaptive learning system," writing answers to the teacher's (or workbook's) questions and uploading them to Google Docs — these are examples of how technology may make the process a bit more efficient or less dreary but does nothing to challenge the outdated pedagogy. To the contrary: These are shiny things that distract us from rethinking our approach to learning and reassure us that we're already being innovative.

Still more worrisome are the variants of ed tech that deal with grades and tests, making them even more destructive than they already are: putting [grades](#) online (thereby increasing their salience and their damaging effects), using [computers to administer tests](#) and [score essays](#), and setting up "embedded" assessment that's marketed as "[competency-based.](#)" (If your instinct is to ask "What sort of competency? Isn't that just warmed-over behaviorism?" you obviously haven't drunk the Kool-Aid yet.) Those of us who once spoke out against annual standardized exams were soon distressed to find that students were being made to take them several times a year, including "benchmark" tests to prepare them for the other tests. But we couldn't have dreamed that companies would try to sell us — or, tragically, that administrators and school boards would be willing to buy — dystopian devices that basically test kids (and collect and store data about them) continuously. Even the late Jerry Bracey never imagined things could get this bad when he referred to how we were developing the capability "to do in nanoseconds things that we shouldn't be doing at all."

If you haven't given much thought to the kind of intellectual life we might want schools to foster, then it might sound exciting to "personalize" or "customize" learning. But [as I argued](#) not long ago, we shouldn't confuse personalized learning with personal learning. The first involves adjusting the difficulty level of prefabricated skills-based exercises based on students' test scores, and it requires the purchase of software. The second involves working with each student to create projects of intellectual discovery that reflect his or her unique needs and interests, and it requires the presence of a caring teacher who knows each child well.

Even if we were willing to use test scores as a measure of success — something I don't generally recommend — [a recent review](#) found that studies of tech-based personalized instruction "show mixed results ranging from modest impacts to no impact" — despite the fact that it's remarkably expensive. In fact, ed tech of various kinds has made headlines lately for reasons that can't be welcome to its proponents. According to [an article](#) in Education Week, "a host of national and regional surveys suggest that teachers are far more likely to use tech to make their own jobs easier and to supplement traditional instructional strategies than to put students in control of their own learning." Last fall, meanwhile, [OECD reported](#) negative outcomes when students spent a lot of time using computers, while Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes ([CREDO](#)) [concluded](#) that online charter schools were basically a disaster.

Lucid critiques of ed tech — and of technology more generally — have been offered by educators and other social scientists for some time now. See, for example, the work of Larry Cuban, Sherry Turkle, Gary Stager, and Will Richardson. (Really. See their work. It's worth reading.) But their arguments, like the available data that fail to show much benefit, don't seem to be slowing the feeding frenzy. Ed tech is increasingly making its way even into [classrooms for young children](#). And the federal government is pushing this stuff unreservedly: Check out the U.S. Office of Education Technology's 2016 [plan](#) recommending greater use of "embedded" assessment, which "includes ongoing gathering and sharing of data," plus, in a development that seems inevitable in retrospect, a tech-

based program to foster a [“growth mindset”](#) in children. There’s much more in that plan, too - virtually all of it, as blogger Emily Talmage [points out](#), uncannily aligned with the wish list of the [Digital Learning Council](#), a group consisting largely of conservative advocacy groups and foundations, and corporations with a financial interest in promoting ed tech.

There’s a jump-on-the-bandwagon feel to how districts are pouring money into computers and software programs - money that’s badly needed for, say, hiring teachers. But even if ed tech were adopted as thoughtfully as its proponents claim, we’re still left with deep reasons to be concerned about the outmoded model of teaching that it helps to preserve — or at least fails to help us move beyond. To be committed to meaningful learning requires us to view testimonials for technology with a terabyte’s worth of skepticism.

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