

Book and Resources Reviews

***Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates* by Neil Selwyn (2011, London: Continuum)**

Within *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates* Neil Selwyn summarises the key contemporary debates in the field of educational technology. It is a useful critical overview for anyone wishing to explore the area and adopts a social dimension to understanding technology. Each chapter provides a useful summary as well as opportunities to explore ideas further with a well-chosen and digestible reading list and further questions for the reader to consider.

In the opening chapter Selwyn attempts working definitions of ‘Education’ and ‘Technology’ and reminds us that technology should be used to allow us to explore otherwise impossible tasks, or do them more efficiently, but concludes that this is not always the case in practice. In the following chapter he asks if technology *inevitably* changes education? Here he challenges an overtly optimistic hegemonic stance that subscribes to the life-changing power of technology and asks, despite the proliferation of educational ICT strategies, if we really *need* technology in education. He argues that educational technology often suffers from monolithic ‘top-down’ managerial imperatives to improve efficiency in an increasingly competitive market. Often these imperatives are not properly critiqued to develop a more ‘socially circumspect analysis of education and technology’ (p.32). He believes that ‘technical fixes will only deal with the surface manifestations of a problem and not its roots’ (p.33) which are social in nature – not technical – and therefore related to the ‘lived’ experience of teachers and students.

Selwyn then takes a historical perspective in chapter three by arguing that we should learn from the historical disappointment of previous optimistic technological ‘innovations’ for education, which didn’t prove anywhere near as successful as intended. This, he suggests, is because they were a ‘solution in search of a problem’ (p.57) – something that appears to be his personal pet-hate for technology misuse in education. In chapter four he asks if technology improves learning by exploring cognitivist, constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning and technology in depth. He concludes that there is little conclusive evidence that technology really improves learning, stating that many such claims are usually based on supposition, personal beliefs, opinion and conjecture. Any credible empirical research in this area would be woefully difficult to perform and he even suggests that ‘the wrong questions are being asked altogether’ (p.86) with research of this nature.

In chapter five Selwyn exposes the fallacy that technology makes education fairer, more equal and more just. He argues that whilst the internet has greatly expanded the scope and availability of learning, much of this learning is a proliferation of popular and profitable courses. Also, technology is not as accessible as some would have us believe, refuting the idea that ICT widens participation. For chapter six he argues that the teaching professional would never be 'redundant' in our technological age, but carefully suggests that the role of the teacher might become somewhat diminished over time. In chapter 7 he expresses qualified support for educational institutional change regarding digital technology but he argues that 'we should be wary of setting a precedent where the interests of technology outweigh all other social, cultural and political concerns' (p.159) and that the 'industrial-era' school will continue for some time.

In chapter eight Selwyn mentions the gap between the 'clean' instructional rhetoric and the 'messy' social reality of technology use in education and reiterates that it is difficult to prove, with any degree of certainty, that technology truly enhances learning. He suggests that technology benefits those that are already able, competent confident and involves more work for the practitioner. He argues that current predictions about the future of educational technology are 'driven by matters of ideology rather than objective forecasting' (p.172) and we need to 'develop "better" forms of technology use that draw upon – rather than clash with – their own "local" experiences and practices' (p.173). These 'new technologies are symbols of progress rather than guaranteed harbingers of change and improvement' (p.175). He says 'educational technology is best seen as a site of ongoing negotiation and, often, intense social conflict and struggle (p.177) rather than a *fait accompli*. It should be done by educational professionals not done to them. Hence the voice of the practitioner becomes more important, not to naively restore a pejorative 'teacher lobby' but for democratic practitioner input.

Weaknesses in the book include some repetition of material between the chapters, though this does allow for the reader to understand most chapters in isolation. Selwyn appears to have rather a large axe to grind against corporate imperatives in Education and Technology – though he does willingly accept this throughout the book. Perhaps the main issue is that he opens up critical debate about educational technology that he couldn't possibly hope to resolve. To be fair, the debates are rather too ponderous for any author to 'close', but one can't help thinking that he could have tried harder at times.

How is this book of use to media educators? In the same way as we might try to understand media as a product of the social world which can only be understood in relation to social practice, Selwyn's book supports the idea that human technologies are social constructions, as well as sites of intense struggle and conflict, that cannot be socially

neutral. Media, like learning technologies, mean different things to different people in different contexts – so media texts and learning technologies have important similarities, if not in the way that they are proliferated then certainly in the ways in which they produce meaning.

Reviewer – Pritpal Sembi, University of Wolverhampton

***Chavs: the Demonization of the Working Class* by Owen Jones (2011, London: Verso)**

Media teachers, and their students, are often concerned with issues of identity, representation and in particular how certain sections of society can end up being stereotyped by an aggressive media; this can go on to shape public opinion, and even public policy. This book by Owen Jones should be of interest to all media educators then, as it examines how successive UK governments, aided by the print media, have attempted to articulate policy purely along middle-class lines at the cost of portraying British working-class people as a ‘feral underclass’.

Jones, himself an Oxbridge educated former trade unionist and parliamentary researcher, plots a compelling 30-year history of the working-classes as they are first marginalised and then demonised by a succession of politicians and the modern mass media. He skilfully skewers Tony Blair’s statement that, ‘we’re all middle-class now,’ by showing how the UK gradually became a country for the wealthy, ruled by the wealthy.

In a similar way to George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Jones tours the UK while explaining how the Thatcher government of the 1980s stripped trade unions of their powers and destroyed the manufacturing industry, almost as an act of revenge – the very place where working-class people found employment.

This is not just an anti-Tory rant, however. *Chavs* is just as critical of the New Labour project as it is of the Conservative Party – here described as a ‘coalition of privileged interests’; both Blair and Gordon Brown are blamed for imposing the ‘Thatcherite settlement’ on working-class people who were effectively disenfranchised and demonised at the same time.

In terms of education, *Chavs* shows that the middle-classes have the ‘sharpest elbows’ when it comes to getting their children into the best schools and universities, and that Higher Education is now completely loaded in getting the rich into the best universities and ensuring that the working-classes are kept out. For Jones, it is clear that opportunities

for working-class people are limited, and education has become the key tool in keeping them in check.

Chavs, then, is quite a depressing read; the closing chapters suggest that many working-class people are now defecting to nationalist political parties and far-right groups. The solution put forward in this book is for a new movement to represent a largely non-unionised workforce, but which could create new jobs in a revitalised industrial ‘green economy’. The tax system also needs to be reformed so that there is a more even distribution of wealth. So, while *Chavs* may paint a rather bleak picture, working-class politics clearly isn’t quite dead. Yet.

Reviewer – Richard Berger, CEMP, Bournemouth University

***Understanding Media: the extensions of man* by Marshall McLuhan (1964)**

Laughey’s Canon

Editor’s note: This review is the second of our series in which a current media teacher re-examines a ‘classic’ text in honour of *MERJ* editorial board member Dan Laughey and his provocative ‘Back to Basics’ article in *MERJ* 2:2.

What could possibly be relevant today about a book examining the power and influence of new technologies on mankind, written when the first transistorised computers using optical disc were the state-of-the-art technology for espionage and the PC was an object of science fiction? Asked to evaluate the relevance of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* for today’s media teachers, I chose to ignore the brief and instead re-read the book from a student’s perspective.

McLuhan’s essential message (that the content of a medium is ineffectual and blinds us to the true character of that medium) is as subjective a statement as it is dependent on the political orientation of the reader, not to mention their level of media literacy. McLuhan urges us to see beyond the message of the flashing neon sign and consider the deeper global significance of the electricity which powers it, similarly the influence of the invention of moveable type as opposed to any particular printed examples of poetry or prose.

Undoubtedly groundbreaking in its day, prophetic even, the book is now best regarded as a collection of essays, only some of which remain meaningful - if not definitive. The intervening 50 years, characterised by the rapid emergence of digital technologies and their inherent interactive nature, have made redundant many of the essays on the audiovisual media in particular.

The hierarchical structures of the media industries prevalent in the 60s no longer hold sway; oppositional and alternative voices are unheard in McLuhan's text, though he was one of the first to predict that the ownership and control of information would define power, wealth and employment in an increasingly 'electromagnetic' world. His oft-quoted vision of the 'Global Village' sadly remains one of the more condemnatory contradictions of world economics and the human condition... the media technologies which have such potential to harmonise and equalise our life experience across cultures serve only to widen the gulf between the haves and have-nots in today's global society.

Many of McLuhan's ideas remain worthy of reflection and his unassuming prose style makes his overarching ideas accessible to a broader range of young readers than many subsequent writers on the subject. I'd find plenty of food for thought in this book if I were a media student.

Reviewer – Tim Abberley, Degree Centre Weymouth.