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Book Review

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Visions of Education: Tom Conlon's Radical Voice for Change

In Visions of Education, Tom Conlon's radical voice for change behoves us, above all, to ensure that a clear philosophical platform provides the foundation that informs and influences the choices we make about the place and purpose of the digital in education. Indeed, when one reads about the breadth and vision of his practice, research and ideas one can't help but wonder where we might have been had his voice been more prominent in establishing and guiding Scotland's digital strategy in education over the years.

When it comes to a vision and a philosophical foundation for digital teaching and learning in the Scottish context I would argue that the collected works in this book may require us to reflect on whether indeed our vision and philosophical foundation was fit for purpose, or even firmly established in the first place. The past two decades or so has seen huge sums of money invested in a range of digital tools and spaces aimed at the enrichment and enhancement of learning and teaching in our schools. An ever-present accompaniment to this significant spend has been a narrative of the promise of transformational change in education that this investment would bring. Nevertheless, questions persist about the impact this investment has had on education in Scotland. Indeed, the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 saw the position of the many digital tools and spaces available to Scottish schools elevated to previously unheard of levels of interest and use but it was noted by the Scottish Government's International Council of Education Advisers that during this period there were still "students and teachers with insufficiently developed digital skills" (P.8). Yes, there are many contributory factors at play here but questions regarding our long-term vision and the philosophical foundation underpinning our collective efforts need to be asked.

Tom Conlon's objective and critical eye first came to my attention in 2006 when he wrote his paper The Dark Side of Glow (Chapter 10 in the book). At that time, I was part of a National Government organisation charged with leading

on Glow, Scotland's national intranet for learning. Although my work was not directly related to the Glow workstream I responded to his paper with a blog-post suggesting that his voice was an overly negative one that diminished the enthusiasm, and commitment by many involved with the Glow project. Some years later I looked back on that *irrationally exuberant* post, as Tom Conlon described responses like it, with some professional regret. It had become clear to me when he said in relation to Glow that, "an energetic minority will create noise and excitement but at a deeper level, the life of the school, will continue much as it would had Glow not existed" (p. 70) become, in my opinion, true. This chastening professional experience resulted in a realisation for me that Tom Conlon's voice was one that I needed to pay attention to. It also helped me realise that what we really needed, as he argues in Chapter 10, is an educational culture where we have *a balanced discourse of reflective scepticism* when it comes to the place and purpose of digital technologies in education.

The collection of papers in this book further exemplify and consolidate Tom Conlon's critical objectivity but they also demonstrate his authenticity as a teacher and researcher; one who had a real commitment to ensuring that our children's experience of school is a socially just one.

He authored a range of software programmes that stemmed from a focused pedagogical eye. Chapters two to six showcase his research into his software that explored concepts such as modelling, classification and conceptual thinking. Although to some eyes the software graphics featured in the book may appear dated, what stands out consistently in his research is the pedagogical focus that aimed to address how new technologies could improve identified educational needs and challenges. For example, it is evident that a comprehensive understanding of theoretical perspectives such as metacognition and formative assessment informed the learning design of his software. In chapter five in particular, we see him critiquing educational software as restrictive in its design, resulting in an all too often passive experience for the user; an experience that was embedded in a transmission model of learning. Instead of this approach he focused on the creation of software that offered a more dynamic and dialogic experience for learners, one that maximised their active cognitive engagement with their learning at, and with, the computer. Indeed, those who have an interest in what artificial intelligence can bring to the table in the learning process will find Tom Conlon's research and ideas of great interest.

The further you move into the book the more you appreciate the prescience of Tom Conlon's thinking about the impact that the digital world would have on society and school. Chapter seven frames a series of questions that we in education would face in terms of how the digital world would impact

on children and how we should then, *teach accordingly*. Indeed, as far back as 2005 he was already questioning how school curriculum needed to take account of how access to a worldwide network of information and learning may impact on a model of school that was firmly embedded in 20th century practices. The prescient questions he asks in chapter five about the way subject knowledge and knowing things may lose importance in education due to its ease of access are even more important to us now in these days of Google Assistant, Siri and Alexa. The questions he asked about all these ideas are ones that we continue to wrestle with today

Finally, Tom Conlon's ability to frame his critical and thought-provoking ideas in the form of short stories in the dystopian science fiction genre gives evidence of his ability to present his ideas in a creatively accessible manner. In chapter 8, *Education 2003: A nightmare in Four Scenes*, we engage with possibilities about what the future may hold for the use of technologies in education; possibilities that are framed against a Foucauldian backdrop of surveillance, punishment and control. In chapter 13, *Priority no.1*, explores the possibility of the school and schooling reimagined with radical policy changes and funding models in conflict with established barriers to change. Again, the themes that come through in his work, written over thirty years ago, are as relevant to us today as they were when they flowed from his pen, or keyboard for that matter!

This book is a must read for anyone involved in the formulation of educational policy in the domain of digital teaching and learning. Chapter nine highlights how his critique of major digital policy initiatives such as the National Grid for Learning, the New Opportunities fund for ICT, and Glow for that matter, should encourage us to be more ready to welcome a critical academic perspective of the design and management of such large scale projects.

It is also a book that those in teacher education should seriously consider adding to their reading lists. There are so many starting points for rich discussion to help our students think about the place and purpose of digital technologies in education. It is one that can help our future teachers, at the earliest stage of their careers, establish their philosophical perspective about the place and purpose of the digital in their practice.

Tom Conlon's vision and voice persists in this timely collection of papers. A voice that promotes education, engagement, and empowerment in our use of all things digital in teaching and learning. Such collective engagement and empowerment by all stakeholders can, as Tom Conlon (2000) argued, contribute to a culture of transformational change with new technologies and digital practice that we actively and wittingly help shape. Failure to do so, he argued,

could mean that "chip by chip the technology could take us into a future that we would never willingly have chosen for ourselves" (p.31).

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