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Book review

Digital Technology and the Contemporary University: Degrees of Digitization, by Neil Selwyn, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 156 pp., \$165.00 (hardback), \$52.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0415-72461-6 (hardback), 978-0415-72462-3 (paperback)

Wading through the daily deluge of institutional emails announcing yet more onerous procedures to be complied with or, maybe, another managerial initiative that will achieve nothing, you might ruefully reflect on the digital technology that now permeates life at work and home. Wasn't it supposed to liberate you? Didn't its advocates promise greater autonomy, endless vistas of creative endeavour, and a more productive use of your time? How has the reality turned out so differently from the promise, at least in higher education?

Questions such as these motivate Neil Selwyn's *Digital Technology and the Contemporary University*. Although there have been countless research papers on digital technology in education, they have tended to be restricted to two areas of enquiry: what students do with their technology (both formally and informally) and how educators should best incorporate it into their teaching. Relatively little attention to the uses of technology in the managerial policies of higher education, and their relation to the wider changes happening in the higher education sector. These are major themes of this book. As Selwyn says in his preface (p. ix) 'digital technology [is] an extension of the politics of higher education', and included in the politics of higher education are questions of equality, exclusion, workplace politics and 'the steady commercialization and privatization of university "services"' (p. ix). Selwyn is therefore interested in technology's role in the current transformation of higher education into a global, marketised industry, modelled along corporate lines and with its senior management increasingly drawn from non-educational sectors. His approach is to survey 'the realities of universities and digital technology' (his title for the book's main section) across a broad front. In particular, he looks not only at uses of technology in administration and management, but also at its uses in the working lives of university staff and students. Rather surprisingly, he also looks at digital technology in relation to the fabric, spatial design and architecture of universities. All this is an ambitious undertaking for a slim volume of only 156 pages.

Selwyn reflects that discussions of technology in education have largely been annexed by ‘boosters’ and ‘doomsters.’ The boosters proclaim the transformative power of technology, citing its capacity for ‘democratisation’ by bringing to the multitudes what hitherto only the privileged have enjoyed. As Selwyn says, the boosters’ largely positive and uncritical view has been dominant and influential in education. Selwyn quotes a former Vice Chancellor of the UK’s Open University, John Daniel, who saw technology as having the potential to cause ‘a tectonic shift that will bring the benefits of learning and knowledge to millions’ (p. 9). Doomsters, on the other hand, see the inroads of digital technology into education as debasing education itself. For doomsters, increasing reliance on technology leads to an ersatz form of education in which, for example, fact-gathering from the Web passes for ‘research’. Selwyn considers the prognostications of doomsters and boosters to be ‘equally overwrought’ (p. 10) and espouses a line of attack that avoids either extreme while acknowledging that each may sometimes have a grip on truth.

Unsurprisingly, Selwyn identifies the rise of globalised neoliberalism as a major external factor in recent transformations of universities. Education has been increasingly construed as a product that is ‘delivered’, ideally for minimum outlay and maximum return, with competition regarded as the appropriate source of metrics for quantifying success and allocating resources. Accompanying this, there has been a shift in the type of people who manage universities, and in the structures and values of management. Management techniques and attitudes associated with neoliberalism have been imported into the public sector in the guise of ‘New Public Management’, which seeks to adapt market concepts to public services. Selwyn observes that the supposed individual autonomy and freedom of choice central to neoliberal thinking are ironically absent in all but the higher managerial levels of universities. Power and decision-making are instead concentrated in the hands of managers and administrators, and exercised through ever more bureaucratic procedures. Employees’ room for manoeuvre and individual initiative are attenuated. In this context, digital technology facilitates top-down managerial practices, but Selwyn acknowledges that its overall effects for good or ill are not easily characterised. He identifies for particular consideration the ‘social factory’ aspect of university work in which the distinction between ‘home’ and ‘work’ is blurred by ‘always on’ communication channels – and by a managerial expectation that these channels be used all the time. Selwyn sees this as undermining the position of the most vulnerable of staff, who dare not risk absenting themselves from online accessibility, ‘as opposed to the research professors who can circumvent the worst excesses’ (p. 72). Indeed for many university employees the concept of being ‘away from work’ hardly exists, as workloads expand into evenings and weekends. In this respect, the managerial use of technology often

disadvantages the most junior and insecurely employed categories of staff, who cannot appear to be falling short of expectations even if the expectations are unreasonable.

As for the student experience, digital technology is central to the logistics of the student life – for timetables, updates to lecture venues, and other administrative information. Students often augment these official channels with unofficial social media, for example to circulate among themselves correct or relevant information when official sources are inadequate. However, social media are not always used so cooperatively. According to Selwyn, students have been observed using these technologies to perpetuate, rather than diminish, differences along the lines of gender, race and class, although (uncharacteristically for Selwyn) this assertion lacks supporting citations (p.88). One might object that such behaviour is no different from that of the general population, but Selwyn's purpose is to question boosters' assertions about the benignity of technology in education. As for technology as a pedagogic aid, for example for accessing online tools and resources, Selwyn cites studies showing that students' usage is often restricted to passive grazing of information rather than the active construction of knowledge that has often been claimed as innate to the technology. Nor are 'digital natives' conspicuously skilled in their navigation of online resources.

Architecture and spatial design are not obvious topics in relation to the institutional use of digital technology. Nevertheless, Selwyn devotes an illuminating chapter to the subject. As he points out, universities bear the traces – and even harbour the very artefacts – of now outmoded technologies that, in their day, were emblems of progress, such as microfilm readers, electronic whiteboards, video players, and even the humble card index. On a grander scale, many universities have recently embarked on ostentatious architectural projects – of dubious aesthetic merit – to symbolise their embrace of digital transformation. The 'digital campus', with its open-plan spaces, atriums, indoor streets, etc., imports into academia the ethos of Silicon Valley, irrespective of whether these environments are suitable for academic work. The subtext seems to be that Silicon Valley is a model that academic workers ought to aspire to. Many a university library, with its 'break rooms', coffee outlets, reclining chairs and study pods, now offer clear examples. Often digital technology is shoe-horned into buildings that were mostly not designed for it, often with the result of staff working in awkward and unsuitable environments.

Selwyn's conclusion to his wide ranging study is that the optimistic and upbeat expectations of digital technology in higher education have not been realised. As he points out, the problems for which technology is touted as the solution do not arise from a deficit of technology (p. 128). Instead they are social, political, economic and

cultural in origin. For this reason, we must lower our expectations of what technology can achieve. Nevertheless, he maintains that he is no doomster, and considers that education can benefit from digital technologies. To demonstrate his point he devotes the final part of his book to suggestions for more educationally profitable ways of using digital technology in higher education. These suggestions are generally high-level, and relate to the way technology is conceived or discussed. For example, Selwyn suggests that common ways of framing digital technology are tendentious, because they assume that desired outcomes are preordained by the technology. Such assumptions are embedded in the very terminology used, such as ‘learning management system’. Many other examples could be cited. Selwyn considers that linguistic turns like these load the dice. Another, more prosaic suggestion is that universities themselves should create pedagogic tools – ones that are better suited to education than the off-the-peg tools that are often designed for business use.

Selwyn’s book is altogether a commendable essay in viewing digital technology from the perspective of actual use rather than assumed outcome. However, although his adroit steering between the boosters and the doomsters looks even-handed, it is perhaps not entirely convincing. Boosters have dominated so much of the discourse of educational technology that they and doomsters are not symmetrically arrayed on either side of a ‘true’ course. In any case, ‘boosterism’ and ‘doomsterism’ are false antitheses. To be opposed to boosterism is not necessarily to be even slightly doomsterish. In fact, boosters and doomsters are united by technological determinism, and both can be rejected for that reason. Technological determinists, among other things, treat technology as an autonomous agent of change, and attribute to it an almost occult power of agency – the ability to change, transform or disrupt. Among academic historians and sociologists of technology, technological determinism is hardly taken seriously as it fails to explain what needs to be explained, which is how technology operates within society. But, as Selwyn points out (p. 17), technological determinism thrives in popular stories of technology, and is strangely persistent among university managers (and educational technologists). Hearing managerial pronouncements about technology is sometimes akin to discovering a cult of phlogiston-belief or creationism in the upper strata of academia. Why technological determinism has proved so hardy in this unmulched soil is not pursued, and I would have welcomed Selwyn’s thoughts on the subject. It surely bears on the main questions of his book. I tentatively offer my own hypothesis that the intractable politics of social justice can be ducked if technology can be wheeled in as a remedy.

Despite its brevity, Selwyn’s book is densely packed and demands careful attention. This is neither criticism nor commendation, but simply an indication to the reader of what is in store. There are some stylistic quirks, such as Selwyn’s frequent prefixing

of ‘can be seen as’ (or its close equivalents) to observations, which can leave the reader wondering whether a claim is being made or not made. Such minor cavils aside, the book is warmly to be welcomed, and it would be heartening (though unrealistic) to think it might initiate a more clear-eyed view of technology in higher education.

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