Editorial: In praise of pessimism—the need for negativity in educational technology

The important thing . . . is not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments. (Albert Camus—Myth of Sisyphus)

Introduction

Educational technology is an essentially ‘positive project.’ Most people working in this area are driven by an underlying belief that digital technologies are—in some way—capable of improving education. This mindset is evident, for example, in the recent tendency to refer to ‘technology-enhanced learning’ or before this to ‘computer-assisted learning’—descriptions that both leave little doubt over the inherent connection between technology and the improvement of learning and teaching. As such, the de facto role of the educational technologist is understood to be one of finding ways to make these technology-based improvements happen and—to coin a phrase often used in the field—to ‘harness the power of technology.’

Of course, this positive approach stems from a desire among most educational technologists to make education (and, it follows, ‘the world’) a better place. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that this inherent positivity has become an all-encompassing—if not hegemonic—feature of educational technology scholarship. Indeed, I would contend that it limits the validity and credibility of the field as a site of serious academic endeavour. These concerns are borne out through the noticeable failure of the educational technology community to engage with critical perspectives on the use of technology in educational settings. Even in the 2010s, any author advancing a critical or negative analysis is likely to be politely ignored or else shouted down as a ‘luddite’, ‘technophobe’ or ‘naysayer.’ In this sense, the apparently calm tone of most educational technology debates and discussions belies a distinct ‘with-us-or-against-us’ attitude. In short, most people working in the field are so convinced of the benefits of technology in education that they are unwilling to think otherwise.

Educational technology has, therefore, become a curiously closed field of academic study—populated by people who consider themselves to be in the somehow more informed position of truly understanding the educational potential of digital technology. This can sometimes lead writers and researchers to adopt an intellectual stance that is evangelical—if not righteous—in its advocacy of this ‘truth.’ As its heart, then, educational technology could be seen as a version of what Kling and Iacono (1988) termed a ‘computerisation movement’—ie., an interest-driven field of practice whose advocates focus on digital technologies as instruments capable of bringing about some sort of new social order. In the case of educational technology, this ‘new social order’ centres on the improvement of education along broadly socio-constructivist lines—with digital technologies supporting and sustaining various forms of individually centred and often informally arranged learning. Of course, most academic disciplines and fields have dominant traditions and shared theoretical assumptions. Yet unlike most other fields of academic study, educational technology appears particularly resistant to viewpoints that contradict its core beliefs and values—not least the orthodoxy that technology is a potential force for positive change.

The case against technological optimism in education

This optimistic view of the potential of education and technology runs counter to many of the recent realities of educational technology use. As anyone familiar with education provision or
practice will attest, fundamental elements of contemporary learning and teaching have remained largely untouched by the waves of digital technologies that have been introduced inside and outside of the classroom over the last three decades. Despite repeated predictions of inevitable change and impending transformation, digital technologies are used inconsistently in educational settings, usually with little large-scale conclusive ‘effect.’ Much of what is written and discussed about educational technology is, therefore, more a matter of faith than it is a matter of fact. In this sense, educational technology is perhaps best understood as being like many other faith systems—i.e., a “system of radical optimism” that persists despite the lack of immediate experience or evidence (Inge, 2003/1912, p.xiii). It follows that many educational technologists are understandably ill-disposed towards anyone whose actions disrupt their own personal faith and optimism. Indeed, educational technology could be seen as a field that requires its participants to maintain a long-term collective belief that the project will be seen through to an ultimately successful conclusion.

An unswerving faith is a completely understandable stance to adopt with respect to the application of technology in education. In many ways, the embrace of a positive and optimistic position within educational technology reflects simply the ‘techno-romantic’ manner in which most technologies are framed within modern thought. Indeed, there is a long-standing intellectual tradition in Western thinking of viewing technology as the pinnacle of scientific accomplishment (Coyne, 1999), stemming from an Enlightenment-informed ideal of ‘progress.’ Thus, as Leo Marx (1994) observed, the act of technology being ‘assigned a heroic role’ in pursuit of this ‘progress’ is certainly not a new one. Moreover, it could be argued that a tendency to be optimistic about the role of technology in modern life is itself an example of the positive essence that lies at the heart of nearly all Western thought. With only a few exceptions (eg., Nietzsche and Schopenhauer), it could be argued that optimism is an essential underlying component of Western philosophy. As Dienstag (2006, p. 34) observes, most Western thought is based around “the notion that there must be an answer to our fundamental questions, even if we have not found it yet, and that this answer will deliver us from suffering.” As such, it is perhaps to be expected that educational technology be driven by an almost unconscious urge to improve the human condition through technology. After all, this is simply how we are brought up to think about the role of technology in modern society.

Yet while maybe justifiable from a philosophical point of view, I would like to argue that this optimism and positivity has, nevertheless, served to limit the credibility and usefulness of educational technology within the wider social sciences. Even in terms of its ‘parent’ field of educational studies, educational technology tends to be viewed as a somewhat lesser endeavour—a peripheral distraction from the more pressing ‘real’ issues of education and society. How, then, can educational technology discussion and debate be reinvigorated and reorientated towards becoming a more realistic, rigorous and ultimately relevant academic form? It is here that I wish make a case for the field to adopt an avowedly critical and—above all—pessimistic perspective.

The need for a technological pessimism in education

Given all that we know about the social complexities of technology use in education, I would like to argue that a pessimistic stance is the most sensible, and possibly the most productive, perspective to take. As such, I am advancing an approach that simply accepts education, technology and society as it is—for better and (more often) for worse. It is important to note here that I am not arguing for the adoption of a dogmatic blanket negativity towards education and technology. In its purest sense, pessimism still allows room for an acceptance that specific things are getting better. However, it also acknowledges the fact that life has long remained the same for most people in most circumstances, and that many social inequalities will continue to persist regardless of
changes elsewhere. Thus at one level, the pessimistic educational technologist is simply one who adopts a mindset that is willing to recognise—and work within—the current and historical limitations of educational technology rather than its imagined limitless potential. As Dienstag (2006, p. 25) points out.

Pessimists do not deny the existence of ‘progress’ in certain areas—they do not deny that technologies have improved or that the powers of science have increased. Instead, they ask whether these improvements are inseparably related to a greater set of costs that often go unperceived. Or they ask whether these changes have really resulted in a fundamental melioration of the human condition.

When seen in this light, it could be reasoned that pessimism is a rewarding and heartening position from which to approach education and technology. As Dienstag (2006, p. 40) contrasts, “the pessimist expects nothing—thus he or she is more truly open to every possibility as it presents itself... the optimist, on the other hand, must suffer through a life of disappointment, where a chaotic world constantly disturbs the upward path he feels entitled to tread.” The pessimistic position certainly relieves the educational technologist from the burden of having to offer grand solutions to problems that can never be solved. As Dienstag (2006, p. 269) continues, the pessimistic mindset “rejects the idea that ... human existence [is] a question or a problem waiting to be solved. Human existence just is—it has no predicate.” In this sense, pessimism provides an ideal means of breaking free from the recurring cycle of ‘hype, hope and disappointment’ that has so often beset educational technology over the past 30 years (see Gouseti 2010).

In these terms alone, concentrating on the negative—instead of the positive—aspects of educational technology should, therefore, lie at the heart of any attempt to establish a ‘better’ field of scholarship and practice. If there is anything to be learnt from the past 30 years of ‘computer-assisted learning’ and ‘technology-enhanced learning’, it surely is that there is little point in maintaining a Pollyannaish stance towards technology use in education. Instead, there are a host of often overlooked critical issues and themes that need to be brought to the forefront of any contemporary discussion of educational technology. Perhaps the overriding change that this entails is shifting the field away from asking ‘state-of-the-art’ questions about technology and towards asking questions that can be described as being concerned with the ‘state-of-the-actual.’ In other words, educational technology scholarship should look beyond questions of how technology could and should be used and instead asking questions about how technology is actually being used in practice.

These questions are certainly less comfortable and more disconcerting than most of the questions that are being asked currently by educational technologists. For instance, just why do most digital technologies remain at the periphery of many people’s educational lives? Why has there been no educational ‘killer-app’ or ‘game-changing’ technology that has transformed learning along the open, mass-participatory and convivial lines that we are continually being promised? Why does a clear gap persist between the rhetoric and the reality of technology use in education? All these questions are based around challenging prevailing presumptions of the technological transformation of education. In particular, the pessimistic approach allows educational technologists to challenge the prevailing optimism in the field by asking questions about what is genuinely new or genuinely different. Where—if anywhere—is technology being used to bring together different areas of education that were previously unconnected? Where—if anywhere—has there been substantial disruption or corruption of educational arrangements?

Thus at one level the pessimistic perspective simply draws attention to the fact that technology use in education is never a completely predictable or certain affair. Given all the obvious limitations of the realities of educational technology use in situ, the ‘glass-half-empty’ view is perhaps the
more rational approach to take than the ‘glass-half-full.’ The pessimistic educational technologist, therefore, accepts that digital technology is not bringing about the changes and transformations that many people would like to believe. Similarly, the pessimistic educational technologist recognises that to imagine, otherwise, for the future is to wilfully misunderstand the nature of social change. Yet to repeat the point made earlier, this is not to argue for the reconfiguration of educational technology into a defeatist endeavour. Instead, pessimism can provide an ideal basis from which educational technologists can achieve positive ends. While the field of educational technology clearly has much to gain from taking pessimism rather than optimism as the starting point for all of its activities, this should be done as a valuable means of then exploring how best to work alongside and within the imperfections of digital technology and education.

**Pursuing pessimism with a purpose**

It is therefore important to note that what I am advancing is the *purposeful* pursuit of pessimism. This is not what Michael Burawoy (2011) identifies as an ‘uncompromising pessimism’ that is engaged with for its own sake. I am certainly not arguing for a revival of what Flanagan (1976, p. 1) termed “the occupational masochism” of some aspects of social science that revel in a “jaded sense of impotency.” Similarly, I am not suggesting that educational technology scholarship succumbs to what Leo Marx (1994) identifies as a ‘postmodern pessimism’ centred on the fatalistic acceptance of the ‘domination’ and ‘menace’ of life by large technological systems. All I am advocating is that educational technology is approached from a position that expects nothing—a position that is not be confused with the nihilistic position of wanting nothing or even the sceptical position of knowing nothing. The pessimistic educational technologist should neither celebrate nor welcome the constantly unsatisfactory situation of education and technology—rather they should ‘simply consider it their duty to call attention to it’ (Dienstag, 2006, p. x).

This suggests approaching educational technology from a position similar to Gramsci’s notion of being ‘a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will’ (Gramsci, 1971/1929). In other words, this should be a pessimism that recognises the usefulness of starting from a position that acknowledges the parameters and boundaries of any technological endeavour, and has realistic expectations of the political struggles and conflicts that surround any social change. This knowledge can then be used to go on to inform political action conducted in a more optimistic spirit. Thus, while the pessimistic educational technologist recognises that they may well be defeated in their ultimate ambitions, they should be in no way be defeatist in their actions.

I am therefore proposing that the field of educational technology engages in pessimistic thought not from a sense of despondency, but as a sensibility from which political intervention and actions can be derived. Pessimism should not result in a passive resignation to one’s fate but as an active engagement with continuous alternatives. Pessimism can therefore provide a powerful basis for exploring ways that educational technologies can be used by individuals to better survive within an inherently imperfect world. As Dienstag (2006, p. ix) points out, in the right hands, pessimism can be—and has been—an energising and even liberating philosophy. While it does indeed ask us to limit and eliminate some of our hopes and expectations, it can also provide us with the means to better navigate the bounded universe it describes.

I am mindful that these proposals do not sit well with the current educational technology literature. These will certainly not be easy changes for most educational technologists to make. These arguments certainly require everyone working in the field to alter their opinion of what can be expected from technology, if not from themselves. Yet, I am in no doubt that a pessimistic spirit can enrich all aspects of educational technology—from the discussions and debates that take place within the field, to the products and practices that emerge from it. For instance,
a pessimistic spirit would certainly strengthen and extend the research questions and research methods that currently dominate empirical studies of educational technology. It is simply not good enough to look only for instances of where educational technology ‘works’, or to focus solely on examples of ‘best practice’ and the ‘leading edge.’ The pessimistic position would certainly help educational technology researchers move beyond a ‘legalistic’ approach to an ‘evidence’ approach—i.e., as a confirmatory means of establishing a case for the predetermined position that ‘technology works.’ At the moment, this ‘proof of concept’ mentality persists in much educational technology scholarship, often directing researchers and writers away from examining the compromised and problematic everyday uses (and non-uses) of technology in education.

A pessimistic approach would also lead the field to be more modest in its intentions and in its interventions. An acceptance that there is no technical formula for overcoming the entrenched social, political, economic and cultural issues that underpin educational ‘problems’ would certainly leave educational technologists free to work ‘around the edges’ of educational settings, rather than attempting to reform or transform them from the centre. From this perspective, technology-based products and practices can be developed as a means of managing circumstances that educational technologists may well find unsatisfactory but exist nonetheless. Indeed, there is clearly a need for educational technology writers and researchers to attempt to work with rather than against the formal structures of educational settings such as schools and classrooms—i.e., the settings where the vast majority of learning and teaching continues to take place despite of academic valorisation of the informalisation of educational activity. However, this requires a very different approach from the distinctly anti-institutional reform-led agendas that have crept into much work in this area over the past 10 years or so.

Thus, rather than ignoring or even blaming the apparent inefficiencies and failings of current education arrangements, educational technologists should be engaging actively with the negative aspects of education and technology and exploring how best to withstand them. Surely, there is nothing wrong with attempting to develop realistic and honest ways of working with digital technologies in education that involve thinking the worst (rather than the best) of them? Of course, this would mean reorienting the educational technology mindset so that it is accepting the social world as it is and is comfortable in its inability to offer definite technological answers to what are indefinite problems. This would therefore mean refocusing the imaginations of educational technologists away from some of the wilder ‘science fictions’ of their particular areas of technological interest and instead encouraging greater engagement with the ‘social facts’ of education, technology and society. These are not inconsiderable changes to the field of educational technology, yet they are certainly necessary changes if it is to become a fully rounded and mature field of academic inquiry. As this paper has argued, to go forward with hope and an ‘optimism of the will’ with regards to technology and education surely requires an initial ‘pessimism of the intellect.’ We should not—and can not—expect to have one without the other.

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References