From Blogs to Bombs. The Future of Digital Technologies in Education.

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Review by Jeffrey Barlow

Mark Pegrum’s short book (146 pages) may be just right for teachers who feel overwhelmed by the knowledge gap between themselves and their students with regard to digital matters. The students, invariably “digital natives”—those who have grown up with computers omnipresent their entire lives—not only know how to do things the teachers have usually only read about, but the students discuss them in a highly specialized language that usually renders those outside the culture mystified.

The main point of the book, however, is to persuade the reader that educators simply must pay more attention to technology in their curricula. The author accomplishes this through a sort of alternative carrot-and-stick approach: do so, and much high-level learning will occur; do not do so and a high social price may be paid. At a higher level, the point of the book is also to produce good policy by making sure the stakeholders in important educational decisions have a very broad view of the issues, and of the possible consequences of their decisions.

From Blogs to Bombs is, however, a great deal more than simply an introduction to the advantages and disadvantages of mainstream digital technologies. Pegrum focuses on the advantages to even a novice teacher of working with digital materials.

As most teachers might expect, the author is a whole-hearted constructivist in his pedagogy, seeing the Web as itself the best possible tool for constructing and sharing meaning between learners. He does, however, see many uses for other pedagogies, such as behaviorism and even perhaps for stimulus-response learning at times. To him, however, knowledge is “…a property of the network.” (28)

The work uses the metaphor of “lens” as in “technological lens,” “pedagogical lens,” “social lens” to make the point that digital subjects usually cross intellectual boundaries rather freely. Pegrum
himself then uses these lenses (each organized into a chapter) to unpack the broad impacts of digital technology in schools. For example, one of the lenses is “Many Literacies” which include print literacy, search literacy, information literacy, participatory literacy, visual literacy, audio literacy, media literacy, virtual world literacy, gaming literacy, remix literacy, personal literacy (how to present yourself on the World Wide Web), intercultural literacy, technological literacy and texting literacy. Each of his other lens is equally nuanced and multi-focused.

While short, the work is by no means simple. Pegrum is very familiar with a broad range of research on each of the many issues he raises, and occasionally introduces voices to the discussions which may not be familiar to American readers. He has a strong interest in policy as well as theory and while he cannot dedicate many pages to any given issues, each of them seems to have been very thoroughly dealt with at the last. He is rather critical of conservative positions on issues such as literacy, seeing them as essentially political efforts to maintain the status quo in the interest of maintaining control.

The author is an Australian scholar and, as of the time of writing, an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Western Australia. Australia has had considerable controversy over the place of the Web in public life, with a strong governmental impetus toward increasing censorship in the name of first, national security then of the protection of the young. [1] The author’s bruises from this conflict are in evidence throughout the work, and the last chapter, “Many baaas & ^^^^” (See the sheep?) is a rather fervent appeal for teacher-directed education on digital issues as a counter-balance for the attempts of governments and corporations to control and exploit the Web, sometimes at the expense of freedom of access. Pegrum’s answer to all these issues is simple: “Education”. And From Blogs to Bombs might well be the place for many teachers, especially novices, to begin.

Endnotes


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