Learning with 'e's

Educational theory and practice in the digital age

Generated by Steve Wheeler

Foreword by Richard Gerver

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Introduction

They say that your school years are the best years of your life. For me, school was a strange place where lots of confusing things happened and very little made much sense. My formative years went by in a blur of indifference with the occasional memorable experience.

One such occasion was at the end of my time in school, when I met with my careers guidance teacher. This was 1972, during the heady days of the final lunar landings, where space exploration was top news. Space travel and moon landings had caught the imagination of just about every kid in the school. On a school trip the previous year I had also visited the Philips Evoluon, a science and technology exhibition run by the electronics manufacturer in Eindhoven, Holland. The building was shaped like a huge flying saucer. Inside, we had watched live science experiments and tried out exotic new technologies like video conferencing. It had fuelled my young imagination even more. The conversation with my careers guidance teacher went something like this:

'So, Wheeler, what do you want to do when you leave school next year?'

'I want to be an astronaut, sir.'

A moment's silence. A slight pause while the career teacher's spectacles glinted. He adjusted his tie, then …

'Don't be silly, sonny. Being an astronaut isn't a real job.'

'Yes it is, sir.'

'No it isn't.'

'It's what I want to be, sir. I want to explore space and stuff.'

'Well, I'm afraid that's just impossible. Anyway, you have to be an American to be an astronaut.'

'Or a Russian, sir. They're called cosmonauts in Russia, sir.'

'Well, clearly you're neither, so you need to think again. What are you good at?'

This teacher works as a careers adviser at my school. He should know this, I thought. He should have done his homework on me.

'I'm good at art, sir.'

'Hmm. What else are you good at?'

'Music. Not a lot else.'

'OK … not academic … ' he muttered, jotting down a few notes, 'so you'll be an artist or a musician then. Good luck with that. Time's up, Wheeler, I have a lot of other students to see.'

He indicated toward the door, and I walked out, none the wiser.

And that, as they say, was that. I left school even more determined to be an astronaut, or more realistically, I resolved at the very least to get myself involved in some form of exploration. From my time studying geography and history, I had learnt about the explorers of old, including my heroes David Livingstone, Mungo Park (who always sounded to me like a municipal recreation area) and Robert Falcon Scott, whose mission to reach the South Pole ended in heroic failure.

Astronauts, I felt, were the last great explorers – launching into the deep unknown, exploring the final frontier – space. I wanted to boldly go where no one had been before. To be the first.

Captain Kirk and Mr Spock had a lot to answer for.

The years have flown by, and on reflection, somewhat indirectly, that is exactly what I think I have become – an explorer. I started my career as a graphic designer and photographer, then did technical work with videos and computers, before training as a psychologist. I was also a part-time musician, youth leader, a small businessman running my own independent record label, a lecturer in education, and finally a researcher and associate professor at a large university. In my mind this makes me an explorer, investigating previously unknown areas of education and discovering new forms of pedagogy. I experiment with social media and mobile technologies, learning how they can fit into new methods and contexts, trying them out to see what happens. My job is to navigate new and emerging theories and test their validity.

In a strange and roundabout way, I have actually fulfilled my schoolboy dreams to become an astronaut, although I now explore a different cosmos. This is the cosmos of the mind and technology. I explore learning in the digital age.

My convoluted journey has led me to the writing of this book. I wrote it by drawing on all my previous experiences and a diverse and eclectic range of skills and interests. I wanted it to focus on the big questions and major challenges that teachers face in the digital age.

So here it is. The book that is now open in front of you features my own personal stories and reflections about learning. It is an exploration of some of the new phenomena that I have noticed as a direct or indirect consequence of using technology in education. This book attempts to excavate the theory and practice of education in an age of disruption and change. It highlights new approaches to education in an era where technology is commonplace, and where mobile phones and social media are shaping the perceptions and behaviour of students. It is also a critique of the current education system.

Some of the sections in this book may seem familiar to regular readers of my blog 'Learning with 'e's'. That is because they started out as blog posts, and have subsequently been developed into a more considered and expansive commentary on pedagogy, technology and education. Some sections are presented as personal reflections and narratives, while others are based on empirical research.

Inevitably, this book also features some contributions from members of my personal learning network, teachers and other professionals who have contributed to the dialogue on my blog. It is inevitable because my personal learning network has had a profound influence on my thinking. To all of the wonderful educators who are featured, and to the many others who might have been if space had permitted, I value you and I thank you.

The commentary that runs throughout the book, although not exhaustive, will highlight many of the issues that are currently impacting upon teaching and learning in all sectors, including change and disruption, the redesign of learning spaces, the disputed nature of knowledge in the age of Google, and several new and emerging pedagogical explanations and theories. I pose some challenging questions about our changing identities, roles and positions in society as we teach and learn using digital technology. I point out some of the dangers of the digital age, such as the risk of technology becoming an obsession, and the issues of technophobia. We hear many stories of video game addiction, lost sleep due to

excessive hours spent on social media, or relationship breakdowns due to compulsive use of the Internet.

I believe that for educators everywhere, the challenge is to take devices that have the potential for great distraction and boldly appropriate them as tools that can inspire learners, focus their minds, and engage them in learning.

I also propose the possibility that new technologies can provide solutions to some of the current problems of education. In an age where children seem to have a natural affinity with smartphones, computer games and social media, teachers face a big challenge – and a golden opportunity – to make a difference. This challenge is like no other. The challenge set before teachers and lecturers is to try to make sense of how new technology can promote learning, engage students and inspire them to sustain a lifelong career in learning.

In this book I cannot promise to provide any of the answers to the problems teachers currently face, but I will certainly pose some pertinent questions about the theory and practice of education. Hopefully, I will also offer hints to where some of the answers might be found, and how teachers can start to make a significant impact on the future of education.

So, if you're still with me, let's go on a voyage of discovery – to find out how the world of learning is changing, and how new technology – and you and I – can make a difference.

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New Wine, New Wineskins

> Every man is a creature of the age in which he lives, and few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time.
>
> **Voltaire**

The search is on to discover the best ways technology can be used to enhance, enrich and extend learning. This is not an easy quest to achieve, because technologies do not sit easily alongside traditional pedagogical methods. And yet they should, because as Clay Shirky[1] argues, the social media tools and mobile phones we use are not alternatives to real life, they are now an integral part of it.

There should be no false distinctions between the real world and the digital world in schools. There are certainly none in the minds of students. Sadly, in institutional terms the distinctions do persist, because a notoriously conservative culture pervades schools and universities. New technologies and new ideas are regarded with suspicion. Computers are confined to 'special' labs in schools. Mobile phones are banned in many classrooms and social media services are blocked by education authorities. Video games are viewed as a distraction and a waste of time, and certainly nothing to do with learning.

Meanwhile, as education strives to preserve its old traditions, an entirely new generation of learners, immersed in the digital world from birth, is entering our gates. They are demanding – and expecting – new approaches to learning, approaches that incorporate technology.

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1 Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 37.

"... the Lonely Planet Guide to the future of learning ... invaluable."
Joyce Seitzinger, Academic Tribe
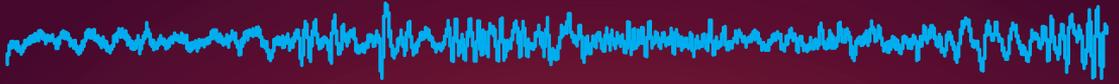
In an age where young people seem to have a natural affinity with smartphones, computer games and social media, teachers and lecturers face a big challenge – or a golden opportunity. How can new technology promote learning, engage students and motivate them to sustain a lifelong career in learning?

For educators everywhere, our challenge is to take devices that have the potential for great distraction and boldly appropriate them as tools that can inspire and engage.

On the back of Steve's hugely popular blog, also named 'Learning with 'e's', he shows how the world of learning is changing, and how new technology – and you and I – can make a difference.

"... one of a rare breed who can make educational theory accessible and relevant to all."
Simon Finch, Northern Grid for Learning

"... challenging, and draws on a great deal of academic research in an accessible and conversational way."
Terry Freedman, www.ictineducation.org
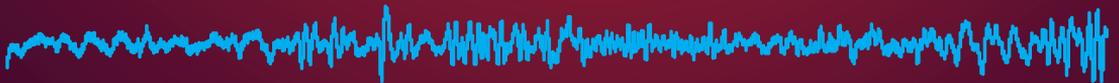
Steve Wheeler is a truly global educator. He has spent his entire career working with educational technology and has been invited to present in more than 30 countries. Steve is currently Associate Professor of Learning Technologies at Plymouth University, where his research interests include social media and mobile technologies in education. He has conducted research into learning technology in all sectors of education and training.

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