

minding our language

why education and technology is full of bullshit ... and what might be done about it

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Introduction

Educational uses of digital technology tend to be discussed in enthusiastic and often exaggerated terms. It is common to hear talk of the digital ‘disruption’ of education, ‘flipping’ the traditional classroom set-up, and technology as a ‘game changer’. Industrial-era schools are regularly decried as ‘broken’, while various digital technologies are celebrated for kick-starting ‘twenty-first century learning’. Doubts are even raised over the need to actually ‘know’ or be ‘taught’ anything in an age where things can be found out on a ‘just-in-time’ basis. This is an area awash with bold assertions and confident claims.

The hyperbole that surrounds digital technology and education certainly emanates from all manner of unlikely sources. Take, for example, these public pronouncements ...

“Get schools out of the 1890s ... In an age when most information and knowledge is transmitted digitally and is increasingly personalized - think about how Netflix, Pandora, Twitter and Facebook work - we should be able to do much better than that. Pioneering projects like Khan Academy, Udacity and Coursera are pointing toward a future of learning that is more like Netflix than the chalk-and-textbook system we have today” (Newt Gingrich).

“[The Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow] provides a glimpse of what is possible by harnessing the power of technology ... Customized learning to meet the unique needs of each student so that their God-given abilities are maximized, so that they can pursue their dreams armed with the power of knowledge” (Jeb Bush)

“The digital world knows no boundaries and is seen as plain sexy by the young” (Prince Andrew, Duke of York).

Such rhetoric is not confined to the great and the good. Indeed, academics, educators and other involved professionals will often slip into similarly idealistic and impassioned

talk. Take, for example, the ways in which the field of educational technology has been described over the past few decades. This has shifted from labels of ‘computer-based-instruction’ and ‘computer assisted learning’ in the 1980s, to ‘technology-enhanced learning’ and ‘connected learning’ in the 2000s. Consistent throughout this re-branding is the presumption not only that learning is taking place, but that learning is being driven actively by the use of technology. Notions of ‘technology-enhanced learning’ and ‘computer supported collaborative learning’ therefore convey deliberate connotations about the relationships between education and technology. The subjective nature of such language is easy to spot in isolation, but also easy to overlook when encountered on a daily basis.

The slippery nature of 'Ed-Tech Speak'

Close comparisons therefore exist between what might be called ‘Ed-Tech Speak’ and the restricted modes of language that persist throughout the worlds of advertising, real estate, political speech-writing, the legal profession and contemporary art. These areas of society are infamously infused with language that is opaque, obtuse and often self-serving. As such, the language that pervades descriptions of education and technology could be judged equally guilty of these traits. Indeed, Ed-Tech Speak is highly political in both its nature and its effect. These should not be treated simply as benign or neutral words, terms, phrases and statements. Instead, these are powerful means of advancing the interests and agendas of some social groups over the interests of others. As such, this limited linguistic base is a serious problem for anyone concerned with the democratic potential of digital technology in education.

Of course, education and technology is not unique in facing such concerns. As theorists from Wittgenstein to Foucault have pointed out, language is an integral element of the politics of everyday life. The restricted forms of language that prevail in any area of society play a key part in maintaining the parameters of what is, and what is not, seen as preferable and possible. Language therefore needs to be recognized as a key element in informing ideas and shaping actions within any educational context. Although it might appear a relatively trivial concern, close attention should therefore be paid to the language used to portray digital technology use in education.

Indeed, very little Ed-Tech Speak could be described honestly as objective, accurate or appropriately nuanced. Instead, the language favored within education to describe digital processes and practices tends to be value-laden. This is language that is often certain what should be happening, thereby leaving little room for alternate outcomes. For example, a seemingly innocuous term such as ‘learning technology’ implies an unambiguous purpose for digital technology in education – i.e. as a tool that is deployed in the pursuit of learning. Consider the implications and inferences of other common terms of the trade – ‘virtual learning environment’, ‘Smart Board’, ‘intelligent tutoring system’ and ‘connected learning’. Such labels convey a clear sense of what will happen when these technologies are used in education. Certainly the possibility of technology *not* leading to learning and/or other educational gains is rarely a matter for consideration.

This discursive closure is sustained by a number of distinct lexical, grammatical, and stylistic characteristics. First is the increased use of active, deterministic descriptions of the core relationships between technology and education – based predominantly around

a privileging of 'learning' and 'the learner'. In this sense, Ed-Tech Speak typifies what Gert Biesta has critiqued as the reductive 'learnification' of education. Second is a heightened language of effect – often in evocative terms of 'impact' or 'transformation'. Here it is presumed that technology will lead to significant changes in educational arrangements and outcomes. Third is a cloying tone, involving the use of playful, homespun and self-consciously childlike language. Who could be angered by the cutesy and 'fun' connotations of 'Raspberry Pi', the 'Coding DoJo', 'Lifelong Kindergarten', 'digital badges' and so on?

Of course, the individuals and organizations who speak and write about education and technology in these ways would most likely contend that they are doing nothing wrong. Surely such language conveys a constructive sense of hope, optimism and ambition to improve education? Surely there is no shame in 'talking up' the imminent realization of the digital transformation of education? Surely it is far better to be a yea-sayer than a nay-sayer? Yet anyone *not* drinking the Ed-Tech Kool-Aid might do well to distance themselves from much of the language that pervades digital education. Instead, this is an aspect of education and technology that requires far more critical scrutiny than it currently receives.

Bullshit and 'organized forgetting'

One useful route into developing a critical take on the language of educational technology is Harry Frankfurt's (1986) philosophical treatise 'On Bullshit'. Just as Frankfurt contends, the language that pervades education and technology does not set out deliberately to lie or hide the truth *per se*. Yet it could be said to conform to Frankfurt's description of language that is excessive, phony and generally "repeat[ed] quite mindlessly and without any regard for how things really are". Seen in these terms, then, much of what is said about education and technology can be classified fairly as bullshit. Pursuing this line of critique therefore makes it easier to unpack the problematic nature of the language of education and technology.

Perhaps the fundamental problem with the bullshit of education and technology is what Frankfurt identifies as the inherent disconnect from 'how things really are'. For example, the past 100 years show that education has been largely *un*-transformed and *un*-disrupted by successive waves of technological innovation. Empirical research has remained resolutely equivocal about the 'learning' that can actually be said to result from the use of digital technologies. So why then is there a continued preference for referring to these and other aspects of education and technology in a manner that ignores their complex realities?

This indifference both to the facts and contextual realities of the situations being spoken about is one of the most problematic aspects of the language that pervades education and technology. As Frankfurt reasoned, disingenuousness is perhaps cause for more serious concern than straightforward lying about a subject. Lying at least involves tacit acknowledgment that there is a truth to be lying against. Bullshitting, on the other hand, stems from a cynical lack of concern over the truth or authenticity of what one is talking about. Many discussions of education and technology are therefore the result of people talking loudly, confidently and with sincerity regardless of accuracy, nuance and/or sensitivity to the realities of which they speak. Thus someone in one of the most

privileged hierarchical positions in British society can tell us that ‘the digital world knows no boundaries’ for disadvantaged young people, and be widely lauded for his insights.

Of course, digital technology is by no means the only area of education that is blighted by such bullshit (similar criticisms could be leveled at the fields of education leadership, neuroeducation, learning styles and many others). Yet this does not excuse those committed to challenging the injustices and inequalities associated with education and technology from letting such mis-description and mis-direction pass. Instead, the language of education and technology needs to be made the focus of sustained controversy. For example, it is surely not satisfactory that the dominant framing of education and technology blithely marginalizes, ignores and/or denies the complex and compounded inequalities of the digital age? Similarly, it is surely not helpful to avoid proper discussion of the political economy of digital education, and the corporate reforms of public education through privately sponsored technological means? The limited language of education and technology therefore needs to be challenged by anyone concerned with matters of fairness, equality and genuine empowerment through digital education.

In this sense, useful parallels can be drawn with what Henry Giroux has described as “the violence of organized forgetting” that underpins contemporary neo-liberal conditions. Giroux talks of how citizens are continually compelled to overlook and ignore the complex historical, political and moral contexts of the current events in their lives. Instead, dominant interests propagate a lazy preference for jocular, superficial and generally vacuous talk throughout popular, professional and even academic discourse. Giroux refers to this as a ‘public stupidity’ that is perpetuated through language that is “divorced from ethics, social responsibility, critical analysis and social costs”. At the same time, overt critical speech is framed as threatening and untrustworthy (take, for instance, the ways in which serious public discussion of the Edward Snowden revelations about the US National Security Agency has been trivialized and debunked over the past few years).

While Giroux directs his analysis towards ‘big’ US societal controversies such as Hurricane Sandy and the Boston marathon manhunt, it is not *too* far-fetched to extend this logic to the ostensibly less controversial domain of education and technology. Indeed, the ways that digital technology is talked about within educational circles certainly extenuate superficial, ephemeral and often banal aspects of the topic at the expense of any sustained engagement with its messy politics. This is also language that routinely normalizes matters of oppression, inequality and injustice. There is little – if any - acknowledgement of differences of class, race, gender, disability or other social ascription. Similarly, this is language that offers scant insight into the political economy of an education technology marketplace reckoned to be worth in excess of \$5 trillion. When seen from any of these perspectives, then education and technology can be justifiably criticized as a site of organized forgetting.

Minding our language – so what to do?

So what can be done in the face of the de-emphasizing and de-powering of critical conversations about education and technology? All told, the forms of Ed-Tech Speak that currently dominate are certainly *not* promoting language that offers much scope for rational thinking – let alone critical resistance – against the complexities of digital education. Instead, we find ourselves caught in a situation where the dominant discourses of education and technology work primarily to silence dissent and reduce most people to shutting-up and putting-up. As Giroux puts it, in such circumstances potentially critical voices are forced to “retreat into accommodation, quietism and passivity” and surrender to “a culture of conformity, quiet intellectuals and a largely passive republic of consumers”.

Fighting back against the paucity of educational technology debate and discussion is no easy task. An obvious first step would be the sustained promotion of alternate language for educational technology – encouraging a counter-lexicon that reflects more accurately the conflicts, compromises and exclusions at play. This recoding could take a variety of forms. One possibility would be to initiate a reversion to more objective and less emotive descriptions. To take the digital technologies that dominate schools and universities as an example, why not refer to the systems that are currently described as ‘virtual learning environments’ as ‘teaching management systems’ or ‘instructional organization systems’? Why not refer to the people using these systems as ‘students’ rather than ‘learners’? Why not refer to internet ‘work groups’ rather than ‘learning communities’? Why not acknowledge that online spaces designed to elicit forms of student contribution are not ‘hang-outs’, ‘cafés’ or ‘hubs’, but places for ‘required response’ or ‘mandatory comment’? Why not acknowledge that students are ‘co-operating’ rather than ‘collaborating’?

A more radical alternative would be to broker deliberately ‘honest’ declarations of the likely consequences of digital technology use. Perhaps we need a language of education and technology that unpacks more aptly the underlying functions of these technologies and exposes their political intent. For example, how might practices of monitoring, measurement, comparison, surveillance and performativity be better reflected in the language used to describe educational technologies? Could we foster talk of ‘content delivery services’, ‘digital resource dumps’, or ‘teacher monitoring systems’ within schools and universities? The increased use of terms and phrases such as these would certainly help to forge a common sense amongst those to whom digital technology is ‘done to’ within education.

Clearly a greater diversity of people also need to be encouraged to speak up about education and technology. This would involve stimulating genuine public conversation about digital education amongst those who have direct and diverse lived experiences of it, providing a counterpoint to what currently passes for public discourse on the topic. Our attention would therefore be prised away from celebrity musings and privileged pronouncements, and towards the voices, opinions and direct experiences of the various real-life ‘publics’ of education and technology – e.g. students, educators, parents, employers, administrators, designers and developers. These sources would better reflect the present failures *and* not-so-glorious histories of education and technology ... warts and all.

Language is clearly a key element to improving the conditions of education and technology. So let us be more mindful of the words that are used, and the ways in which they are used. Let us set about talking more frequently and forcibly about education and technology in ways that foreground issues such as democracy, public values, the

common good, morals and ethics. Let us challenge the tired buzz-words and taglines that distort discussions of education and technology. Let us be more confident in calling out lazy generalizations and out-right bullshit. Above all, let us collectively 'mind our language' when it comes to talking about education and technology. Altering what is said (and how it is being said) is likely to be one of the most straight-forward but significant means of improving the integrity and overall impact of this field. The bullshit should stop here!

References

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Appendix

An incomplete A to Z of Ed-Tech weasel words and terms that deny different, inequality, hierarchy and hardship ...

Affordance, Authentic, Adaptive / Borderless, Blended /Community, Creativity, Convivial, Connected Learning / Disruption, Digital Native, Do It Yourself, Do It Ourselves / Enhanced / Flipped Classroom / Game Changing, Generation I, Generation Y, Generation Wi-Fi / Hard Fun, Hacking Your Education / Interactive, Innovation, Immersive / Just-in-time Learning / Knowledge networks / Learner-centered / Makers / Network, Net Generation, Networked Learning / One-to-one, Open / Participatory, Personalization / Quantified Learning, Quest to Learn / Revolutionize / Serious Games, Serious Fun, Self Organized Learning Environment / Twenty-First Century Skills, Transformation, Teacher-proof / Ubiquity, Uncollege / Virtual learning / Wisdom of the Crowd / X-MOOC /