

The Death of Educational Technology Has Been Greatly Exaggerated

Michael J. Hannafin

It is tempting to endorse the compelling arguments made by David Mitchell. Indeed, both Mitchell's and Beckwith's arguments are high in face validity and consistent with the views of an increasing number of academics. We rarely tackle the truly difficult educational problems with technology, preferring instead to merely "re-host" methods already developed. We sustain often fundamentally flawed educational and training systems. Collectively, we have evolved a dubious intellectual identity, relying more often on the advances of our so-called "root disciplines" (Clark, 1989) than the internal directiveness that characterizes related disciplines. In many instances, we have compromised our integrity by acceding to opportunism -financial, personal, and political.

Mitchell's analysis is certainly provocative, but is it also reasonable? His exasperation with a field so slow to mobilize its intellectual resources in needed directions yet so quick to respond to market-driven demands is understandable, but has he attacked the root or the symptoms? Consider the following issues, which represent only a sample of the relevant questions, clarifications, and issues which must also be considered. While it is impossible to provide the kind of depth and argumentation in a brief response, perhaps I can provide a somewhat different perspective to the topics addressed by Mitchell.

Which educational technology field has died? We are not a unitary field, but a meta-discipline of sorts. We are found across academic disciplines, in public and private educational settings, in R&D institutes, and across ages, grades and levels from preschool through adult. All subsets cannot be tarred with the same brush. Have all variants of the "educational technology" field failed equally? Should we conclude that educational technology has failed in areas such as flight and medical training? Or are we particularly distressed over the inability to address specific important problems, most notably the stagnation of public education? The problem is not simple overgeneralization, but the apparent disregard of notable successes in the face of frustration and failure.

Are the circumstances described by Mitchell really educational technology problems? Or has the field been tied to systemic circumstances which all education and society faces? Educational technologies offer both potentials and perils, but they are not, and have never been, panaceas to all that ails either education or society. We welcome all that educational technology can provide to address societal ills, but we cannot reasonably assess the potential or performance of educational technology by its lack of impact on problems for which it was neither intended nor implemented.

Perhaps the presumed context for educational technology, and the associated expectations for impact, are simply too grand. This is not to undermine the larger perspective advanced by Mitchell, but to recognize that it is precisely that: a perspective on the global and interactive nature of the factors that influence willingness and receptiveness to engage education. The socio-educational inequities described by Mitchell, ranging from rampant unemployment, to domestic illiteracy, to malnutrition and disease, and so on are parts of the context for understanding education. Can educational technology be rightly held accountable for either singularly contributing to this status or jeopardizing solutions? While I welcome increased attention of our technological resources toward the broad-based regional and global problems described by Mitchell, I cannot accept the condemnation of educational technology based upon the continued presence of world problems. The shortsightedness and lack of social impact chronicled by Mitchell is a fair assessment of some segments, but they are neither the focus nor responsibility of educational technology applications in others. To presume that, as a matter of course, educational technology must provide remedies to ills as widespread and systemic as those described is to condemn attempts preemptively.

Has educational technology failed? Failures are human, not technological. The failures are chronic shortsightedness, entrenchment in the "status quo" (Beckwith, 1988), the absence of effective champions of educational innovation, and the inability to initiate the systemic changes needed to ensure success. People are not technologically-mediated; technological success is people-mediated. When successful, we should applaud the vision and creativity of those responsible; when not successful, we should understand where culpability lies and act accordingly.

Does the field need to refocus? Yes, I think we do. Yet, while I share the commitment to refocus, I am alarmed by the potential implications. Is there a "new best way?" Mitchell wisely avoids the temptation to prescribe specifically what curriculum refocus should be implemented. Should all graduate programs and faculty unify efforts around a new enlightened philosophy, curriculum, or world view? In general, I believe that unification is neither needed nor possible. It is at best an intellectual argument of the "What if...?" variety, and at worst an assault on the value of the individual perspectives evolved by intelligent people throughout the world. If, as I believe, we garner a measure of strength from the diversity of our views, the unification of focus would weaken the breadth of our foundation and limit our capacity to advance the next "new best way." The inherent diversity in training, emphases, and program views will continue to hamper the development of educational technology as a discipline, but the liabilities of adherence to a unitary view of the field more than outweigh the potential advantages.

The title of this paper is a loose translation of the often quoted statement, "The rumor of my death has been greatly exaggerated". This statement, attributed to among others Mark Twain, W. C. Fields, and Will Rogers, reflects measured surprise in that an individual so closely affected could have been

unaware of his own demise. Yet, we are surprised not so much that our epithets are written but that they cause us to verify vital signs that we know exist. We must identify our life signs, describe them sufficiently to convince others not to inter the corpse, and rally others to ensure that such mistakes will never again be repeated. We are indebted to F? David Mitchell not so much for his conclusions, but for his analysis. He has caused us to agree comfortably, become righteously indignant about others, aroused elements of defensiveness and outrage, and motivated others to comment, attempt to refute, and otherwise elaborate on several important ideas. In the final analysis, perhaps this is why Mitchell's perspective was articulated: to challenge and not merely to instruct.

REFERENCES

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AUTHOR

Michael J. Hannafin is Director of the Center for Instructional Development and Services at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306.