

25 Years of Ed Tech, 2020. By Martin Weller. Athabasca University Press. 210 pages. ISBN 978-1-77199-305-0

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Martin Weller's *25 Years of Ed Tech* is a necessary – and surprisingly fun! – review of the technologies, practices, pedagogies, and historical amnesias that have created (and plagued) the field of educational technologies for the last two and a half decades. In tracing the major technological developments, Weller also outlines the trends that shape these developments, and suggests some rules for good practice as we look towards a future where technology-enabled learning is almost certainly the norm, if not the default.

Like many working in ed tech today, Weller is an enthusiast and fan of many technologies and tools, but also a critical user with a keen eye for the pitfalls that have marked the development and adoption of educational technologies. This is as much a work of critical digital pedagogy as it is a disciplinary history. Weller does not offer a hagiography of the big names of educational technology, nor does he shy away from the failures and false starts, or the assumptions that underly them. In many ways, the educational technology landscape as described by Weller resembles a field of rakes laying tines-up, and we, the hapless practitioners of educational technologies, are condemned to a life of taking rake handles to the face. But Weller traces this history with his own experience – his own rake handles to the face – and good humour, and does a careful job of demonstrating that, far from being resistant to change, universities are a space of technological innovation and development. Change is slow and technologies are more likely to succeed when they are rooted in an understanding of the unique needs of education, rather than imported from industry. Not moving at the speed of Silicon Valley, Weller suggests, is a feature, not a bug.

Each chapter explores one significant technology, anchored to one year; the book moves chronologically through these examples. Anyone reading this book with some knowledge of the field will have minor quibbles with choices of which technologies Weller included or didn't include, of where the history starts, and perhaps even of the contextual limits of Weller's own experience. Canadian

readers, for example, might look in vain for reference to Industry Canada’s Schoolnet project which launched in 1995 (or the once-beloved SchoolnetMOO). And likewise, aspects of the framing are shaped by Weller’s UK context: noting the per-call cost limitation of Bulletin Board Service, for example, won’t resonate with many North American readers. Weller foregrounds the limitations in the introduction, however, noting that his is a history of ed tech, not the history of ed tech. But the limitations of a single perspective are outweighed by the benefit of Weller speaking from his depth of experience with the Open University and his extensive roots in the field. If we’re choosing one person to tell ed tech’s story, *25 Years of Ed Tech* demonstrates that Weller is a thoughtful, engaged choice.

This is a pre-pandemic book, but the conclusions Weller reaches seem at times eerily prescient for our current moment. He concludes the book by drawing together the lessons of the last twenty-five years with the speedy uptake of online and blended learning – more true in 2021 than ever before! – to remind readers that, in addition to the value of knowing the history and recognizing the cyclical nature of the field, “technological change is rarely about the technologies” and “technology is not ethically or politically neutral” (188). These two lessons are important to keep in mind in the wake of a year of rushing headlong into new tools; for example, the pandemic sped up the procurement and adoption of a relatively new technology like eproctoring, and students are reckoning with the harms and ethical questions that have emerged from the rush. It is these insights and this critical perspective that makes Weller’s articulation of the history timely, even when he’s reflecting on the events of the mid-90s.

One feature of the book that readers might be interested to know about is that in addition to being available in print and as an open access book through Athabasca University Press, it’s also available as an open audiobook, created in the form of a podcast and featuring the voices of a range of established and emerging practitioners in the field.¹ The community support for this project suggests the significance in a title like *25 Years of Ed Tech* which, as Weller points out, offers “a basis for shared understand and common knowledge” in a discipline “remarkably poor at recording its own history” (8; 4). It also demonstrates the book’s own thesis that “everything changes while simultaneously remaining the same” (186); *25 Years of Ed Tech* is the same content whether one chooses to read it in print or the free ePub, or to listen to the podcast, and yet these three offerings are very different experiences. The range of modalities suggest the opportunities of ed tech itself: even as we teach the same subjects, we develop different learning experiences with every passing year.

References

Weller, M. (2020). *25 Years of Ed Tech*. University of Athabasca Press.

¹ Full disclosure: your reviewer had the pleasure of narrating the Learning Analytics chapter for the audiobook project, hosted by the OpenETC at <https://25years.opened.ca/>.

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