

Metaphors of Ed Tech, 2022. By Martin Weller. Athabasca University Press. 192 pages. ISBN 9781771993500

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“Just when you thought it was safe”

In *Metaphors of Ed Tech*, Martin Weller explores the field of learning technology in both the broadest and deepest senses. Weller chooses the application of metaphors as a method, and the resulting book reads more like an enjoyable set of ruminations than rigorous investigation. Weller has long employed metaphors and analogies on his blog, going back to 2006, and in this book he sets out to apply this “more playful aspect of thinking and writing about educational technology (ed tech)” across its practice and culture (p. 3).

In his previous books, Weller staked out a unique place in the scholarship of learning technology. *The Digital Scholar* and *The Battle for Open* employ an approach that is inviting to readers without sacrificing thorough treatment. Weller avoids the common pitfalls of both academic and journalistic writing about education in the digital age. He avoids hype, grand pronouncements and wild predictions, minimises jargon, and rarely goes deep into the weeds. His writing provides a picture of ed tech that encompasses its diversity of practice in a spirit of generosity and inclusiveness. This value within the broader community is evidenced by the response to his *25 Years of Ed Tech*, when a crowdsourced audiobook and a supplementary podcast was assembled with the contributions of dozens of prominent and varied volunteers.

Metaphors of Ed Tech is arguably his most lively and broadly-conceived book to date. He doesn't address metaphor from literary or theoretical perspectives, nor in terms of cognitive science. “This is not primarily a book *about* metaphors, or metaphorical reasoning, but a book *of* metaphors.” (p. 12). As the brilliant *Jaws*-inspired cover art by Bryan Mathers suggests, he is setting out on a voyage of exploration largely in a spirit of fun, noting that his chosen metaphors “allow for playful thinking”, even as he acknowledges that some of his choices “are rather stretched or intended lightly” (p. 12). In addition to metaphor as maps of understanding and the creative interaction between semantic fields, Weller also describes a second and more risky application of metaphor, such as how allusions to “crime” are used to shape ed tech solutions.

Novel approaches are needed when examining technology’s place in learning and education, given the strange and unpredictable history of how ed tech has been practised. Weller notes that for “those of us in it, we are not even sure how to refer to it – a field, subject, topic, practice, discipline?” (p. 45). Ultimately, Weller comes out against framing ed tech as a discipline, for while it is prone to “historical amnesia and its occasional uncritical approach” it also “is rich precisely because people enter it from different fields, bringing a range of perspectives to bear, and it is applied to different disciplines that have their own requirements and challenges” (p. 48). Weller proposes ways of thinking of ed tech as an “undiscipline” via three metaphors. One, is the “ed tech suitcase” packed with different items but in service of a shared purpose (pp. 48-50). He then explores how a nation’s history of art relates to its national identity, the resulting pitfalls and limitations, and how ed tech practitioners might in turn resist their own process of “museumification”. Finally, Weller proposes the concept of digital mudlarking, based on those who scavenged in river mud for items of value in 18th and 19th century London. He outlines previous and ongoing waves of elearning enthusiasm – the web 2.0 bubble, MOOCs, learning analytics, artificial intelligence – and imagines each of them “as a tide, depositing knowledge artifacts that will be washed away by the next big wave unless they are carefully gathered and restored by the digital mudlarks.” (pp. 55-57).

Weller approaches the practice of ed tech as an informed participant and observer, and is sceptical of big claims and quick fixes. He defends universities from attacks on their growing administrative costs, and argues “society cannot place an increasingly complex legislative and administrative burden on universities and then complain they spend more money on legislative and administrative tasks.” (p. 73). He classifies the fervent purveyors of ed tech apocalypse and their miraculous solutions as “ed tech rapture”, and contrasts it with pragmatic practices such as OERs (Open Educational Resources). OERs demonstrably support learning outcomes as effectively as proprietary ones while they save significant amounts of money. “These are not claims couched in a mythical future that requires revolution to be realized, but identifiable and realistic benefits for learners. They are, in short, *useful*.” (p. 88).

The spectre of the “great pivot” that roiled ed tech during the global COVID pandemic, and the emerging aftereffects, loom over the book, and Weller teases that out via an extended interpretation of the 1975 film *Jaws* that may have been a prime motivator for him to write this book. The unpredictable eclecticism of his chosen metaphors is one of the readerly pleasures of the book: the construction of Castell Coch in 19th century Wales, the rewilding of ecosystems, the use of video replay in sporting events, alchemy, the Rebecca Riots, and the Hussites. At its best, the book feels like a rollicking survey of ed tech practice and significance with a fun and erudite host. Not all metaphors align perfectly well, and different readers will undoubtedly find some examples more compelling than others. But overall, the book balances an expert grasp of the relevant issues with an engaging presentation and a genial and open-minded sensibility.

Metaphors of Ed Tech is an excellent overview of the field as it exists today. It offers high-level consideration of wide-ranging practices and balances the many social and cultural dimensions that are brought to bear. It does not pretend to break new ground or provide a unifying theory. But it is a pleasurable, thoughtful, and thought-provoking read that can appeal to a wide range of readers who are working in ed tech, who are studying it, or who simply wish to understand it better.

References

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