

Review: Globalization, Technological Change, and Public Education

Title: Globalization, Technological Change, and Public Education
Author/Editor: Torin Monahan
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The author, Torin Monahan, is Assistant Professor of Justice and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University and claims to have published this book to advance the argument,

“that when public institutions such as education scale back on their social or civic functions in order to accommodate global expectations and industry needs, they concurrently exert greater social control on actors in these systems.” (8)

In so doing he aims to offer answers to a number of very important issues in education including: How do we prepare students to compete in the global economy? How is globalization affecting technological change in public schools? And, how might students and educators manoeuvre through the interplay of technological change and organizational restructuring?

The book contains eight chapters entitled, ‘Politics of Space’, ‘Just Another Tool?’, ‘Technological Cultures’, ‘Fragmented Centralization’, ‘Policy Games’, ‘Flexible Governance’, ‘Future Imaginaries’, and ‘Neoliberal Orders’, which gives an indication of the nature of the publication and its focus on political and governing powers in education. It is based on field work conducted with the Los Angeles Public School System (LAUSD), the 2nd largest in the United States and claims to be the first in depth ethnographic study of the interrelation between globalization, Information technology and public schooling.

Monahan presents an honest account of his observations, experiences and interviews with staff, students and government officials over a period of a year long study. Although this includes a limited analysis of the teaching environment, an examination of the use of IT and some examples of observed teaching methods, there are three dominant features of this book namely, information technology, management and educational policy.

The size of the book should be the first clue in realising that, unfortunately, it falls short of answering the research questions in any effective depth. The two hundred and seven pages and nine illustrations constitute the publication of observations and interviews from a single school study and the local government infrastructure it runs within. After being drawn in by the title and reading the foreword by Carlos Alberto Torres, I was hoping for a truly global perspective on the inclusion of technology in public education. Unfortunately, what I actually got was a local insight into the use of IT in a large but single high school in Los Angeles.

My second criticism is in defining a framework for the study. Such a complex field demands the groundwork to be well defined, lest we fly off at tangents. Globalisation is given a very verbose definition in the introduction but its context is explained away by claiming that globalisation issues begin in the classroom. This is a weak and tenuous link in my opinion and demands further in-depth explanation and

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qualification. "Technology" in this book is related only to IT and computers. We all accept that the world is undergoing a revolution in communications and computer technology, but the inclusion and delivery of technological subjects as well as the use of emerging technology in that delivery goes much further than just IT. It is, therefore, a very narrow perspective and consequently the very generic title of the book belies its content.

This book provides a technologically deterministic view of IT in society and, in particular, its take up in secondary education almost to the point that it is portrayed as something sinister and ill conceived, succumbing to a sort of 'e-paranoia'! Descriptions of teaching areas are given with an emphasis towards the ugly nature of computers and all the logistical paraphernalia that goes with it. Coupled with a review of state politics the result is page after page of damning critique of the management and delivery of education in this single school. And it all makes for rather depressing reading.

The explanations given for some of the author's observations are dubious. Monahan goes to great lengths to steer his arguments towards giving politics and infrastructure as reasons behind seemingly bad teaching practice. To me it seems obvious that another explanation could equally, and in some cases more likely, be badly trained, unmotivated, ill prepared and uncaring teaching staff. The quality of teaching from individuals is not mentioned once in this book, it is all directed and blamed on the technology, the existing infrastructure and government policies on IT. Monahan would better further his argument with an equally vigorous critique of the socioeconomic plight of the students and the ever present crime figures in Los Angeles. LAUSD already has a reputation for overcrowded, under funded and poorly maintained schools, an ideal candidate therefore for such a critique? I don't necessarily think so as the results are a foregone conclusion. I would have rather seen a comparative study with the inclusion of an exemplar institute and a clear rationale

concerning the reasons for disparity. Presenting more balanced and unbiased premises would, at least, make the contents of this book, and more importantly the recommendations of the author, much more credible.

A rather irritating trait of Monahan's writing style is the inclusion of caveats. Following a very verbose build up of premises, an often dramatic delivery of the argument is then followed by various provisos. To me this was further evidence of the author's lack of detailed thought and conviction with his arguments. In fact, I very soon discovered that I found Monahan's writing style generally tedious. The book is full of hyperbole, meaningless metaphor and tenuous unqualified links and comparisons. Although some chapters are worse than others, the whole style and content of this publication isn't as accessible or as pleasing a read as it could be. But at least the format of the book helps the reader by giving summary conclusions at the end of each chapter with recommendations for how people working within the school systems could improve the organizations to better meet the needs of students and teachers.

Chapter seven, "Future Imaginaries", is possibly the most attention-grabbing. What is interesting here is the link between IT, in particular computers, and the commoditization of education. The realisation that government, policy makers and even parents and children have somehow been sucked into the notion that the provision of hardware makes for a good school. This is summed up in an interview with a state governor's educational policy maker,

"Everybody loves it! Kids like computers and video games...parents like to walk into schools and see computers...politicians like it because they can give computers to kids...and high-tech companies like it when politicians spend money on things that help their bottom line." (159)

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This is one of the rare glimpses in this book that highlights something approaching the profound. Indeed, there are some useful lessons to be learned from Monahan's work. Importantly he has highlighted how some technology (IT) can be misused and misinterpreted in the development of curricula and educational policy. How easy it is to be blinded by the uptake of new technology in an attempt to provide a modern and vocational curriculum but completely lose sight of the pedagogical rationale.

In conclusion, the book does contain some interesting view points with regard to the inclusion of IT in schools but, in my opinion, it's too wrapped up in attacking the politics of local government and it is a book which is too biased, presenting little in the way of counter-argument. It may be useful to teachers who wish their students to engage in a text dedicated to such political wrangling as an exercise in investigating arguments of this nature, but apart from that Monahan presents a monologue of whistle blowing and conspiracy theories.