Chapter 15: Rethinking educational technology

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The broad logic of the deployment of technologies to support or aid classroom practices at every level goes a long way back and has persisted to this day. Attention is given to the learning of students. This framing is supported by a long tradition of research which has broadly investigated questions characterised by “how”, that is how best to use a particular technology to support the learning of particular content.

As is the case with any field of scholarship, there is an inevitable blindness to many other research approaches and questions. A kind of orthodoxy emerges in well established fields, something that Law (2004) describes as a hinterland, in which there are reality possibilities and impossibilities, or things that can and cannot be said or thought about. In a manner similar to the developing brain which, counter-intuitively loses neurons as a person ages, so too for a field like educational technology, the range of possible questions and matters of attention is reduced over time, producing a kind of attention blindness to other questions and issues.

Recently, there has been an argument (Selwyn, 2010) to broaden the traditional approach of educational technology scholarship and pay attention to issues of social justice and democracy. As the pervasiveness and impact of things digital continues, there is a growing interest in the politics of various digital developments. There is recent work on the politics of algorithms, an interest in “algorithmic culture” and the emergence of culturomics. In this light, we examine the

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1 A chapter for an edited book: (Bulfin & Johnson, 2013)
possibility of adding a critical/political dimension to mainstream educational technology scholarship and explore the ontological basis of an overlap of these two broad fields. We argue that both fields share an ontological common ground, that of contextualism (Schatzki, 2002).

However, we go on to argue that approaches grounded in contextualism effectively limit a more detailed examination of the role of objects, of the non-language bearing actors, in any consideration of the use of a particular technology for educational purposes. We draw on sensibilities of the sociology of translation, more commonly known as actor-network theory (ANT) to point to the limitations of both mainstream educational technology and critical sociology. As (Latour, 2005 p. 250) argues, “Critical sociologists have underestimated the difficulty of doing politics by insisting that the social consists of just a few types of participants.” Restricting, in advance, the number of things that can act, produces accounts that rely on the familiar, restricted list of forces at play: “power, domination, exploitation, legitimization, fetishization, reification” (Latour, 2005 p. 249).

If we don’t decide in advance what actors are in play, it opens the possibility for a different kind of politics, what Mol (1999) and others have called ontological politics. Reality then is something that is done or enacted and does not precede practices but rather is shaped by them. Attention is drawn to the relatedness of people and things and the way in which the different realities they enact through practices hang together or don’t. Rather than working towards coherence, ANT-informed accounts explore the inter-relationships between co-existing realities. They do not seek coherence but rather examine the tensions, contradictions and overlaps between
different realities. In this way, ANT-informed studies intervene and disrupt not from a contextualist god’s eye position but rather, as Mol (2001) suggests, in a tinkering or doctoring mode.

Technology then is not the singular “thing” that features in the scholarship of educational technology. Rather, it acquires its meaning relationally from other “things”, including the “things” called people. From this basis, we examine a number of the key developments associated with the deployment of various digital technologies for educational purposes and explore the tensions and contradictions associated with the various realities which they perform.

References
