When I grow up I want to be a cephalopod or the unbearable sameness of instrumentum cum docere

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Unlike humans, cephalopods don’t have blind spots, that is they don’t have an absence of photoreceptor cells in the retina. Humans usually don’t notice their blind spot because the other eye helps the brain fill in the missing information. We develop the notion of a blind spot in this chapter to examine some of the patterns of scholarship and research that can be found in the field broadly known as educational technology. Selwyn’s (2010) account of the field points to a persistent focus on learning and on how best to deploy computing and related technologies to improve how people learn. It is reasonable to suggest that the field is largely dominated by these interests and that it also has unsettling parallels with what Lanier (2010) describes as cybernetic totalism.

How we “see” any field of scholarly work is always tricky. The repertoire of intellectual frames and logics we individually bring to bear is, for most of us, routine and well understood. However, what we see, notice or pay attention to is, as Davidson (2011) argues, not a simple matter of choice or logic. She reviews recent research in psychology and neuroscience to make an argument for what she calls attention blindness, things we don’t see because of the attention we give to other things. For academics, attention blindness can be seen as something of a virtue in that a strong focus on a particular way of making sense of the world is encouraged and rewarded in terms of research and writing. It’s both an important strength in terms of developing a scholarly agenda but equally, it is a weakness, in that we miss or don’t see things that may be of great value to what we do.

It is from this position that we examine the current, dominant modes of scholarship and research into making use of various computing and related technologies to support educational practices. While we will map the attention selectivity of this work we are conscious that, as we remain human, we too have attention blind spots and so we take some space in this chapter to trace our sensibilities and their interplay with how we make sense of this field of research.

The long standing focus on learning that has so consistently characterised much of the scholarship of educational technologies is underpinned by a key assumption, that is that the various computing and related technologies are, in and of themselves, an educational good. From this position the key problems and challenges are about “the how”, “how” best to obtain the promised improvements that these technologies afford,
“how” best to domesticate them into particular educational settings (Bigum, 2012). The ongoing and rapid development of new forms of digital technologies provides a never ending stream of products to be explored, domesticated and examined to see how best they can be deployed educationally. They are important attention attracting objects. There is always plenty to attend to as well as a backlog of unpaid product development engineering to be done (Franklin, 1999).

Though the material technologies continue to improve and new products appear with increasing frequency, the questions, protocols and logics of scholarship and research about these technologies in education remain remarkably constant. Their sameness and predictability are such that it would be a relatively simple matter to automate a good deal of this work. The practices seem almost ritualistic. It is here, at the point of practices, that we need to declare our hand.

We draw on a set of sensibilities that is called material-semiotics (Haraway, 1992) or, perhaps more commonly, actor-network theory (ANT). As Law suggests, ANT is neither a theory nor an it and is better seen as a diaspora that overlaps with other intellectual traditions (Law, 2008). Drawing on these resources, the realities we have alluded to in the study of educational technologies are not assumed to be, as we have suggested, similar, repetitive, singular or even coherent. That they appear that way means that they are being done that way. So if we are interested in the politics of this work or its lack of sensitivity to questions of social justice then we need to attend to the practices that enact these realities.

ANT takes an anti-essentialist stance by assuming that things acquire their properties relationally, or, more generally, all the world is relational. What is of interest is how things got to be the way they are, rather than assuming that things have essences, properties or affordances. Rather than different perspectives on a single reality, ANT posits multiple realities. So things that appear coherent can be examined to see how different realities are held together and where they overlap, contradict and interfere with one another. Both humans and non-humans are important in these accounts and ANT assumes no a priori difference between the two, being only interested in how they are enacted.

This chapter draws attention to the contingencies of any assemblage in which the digital is deployed. It draws on empirical case studies to tentatively disrupt some of the taken-for-granteds and givens in the use of digital technologies in education. It resists the urge to locate the many developments and changes within big explanations and instead urges the careful exploration of the articulations of practices that work to produce effects which we are, more often than not, able to “recognise” through our McLuhanesque rear view mirrors.
References


