Education Is Not an App: The Future of University Teaching in the Internet Age

Poritz, Jonathan A.; and Rees, Jonathan
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017

Book Review

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This book captures the frustration of many faculty who are witnessing the decline of faculty governance against the rise of administrative fiat, particularly in areas that impact pedagogical choice. In seven main chapters, the authors provide a detailed view of the systems and decisions that are so often thrust upon faculty. They do a superb job describing the landscape of MOOCs, FLOSS, and LMS in everyday language. They deal with a broad range of issues to show the ways in which faculty are being (sometimes willingly) deskilled through technology. These authors are not dismissive of technological innovation, but they are wary of some aspects of it. They are aware that this book will quickly become outdated but teachers will find that the evidence and core arguments presented here remain worthy of attention.

Education is Not an App is a manifesto of sorts, calling faculty to embrace their freedom to make pedagogical choices, a freedom that is often smothered by administrative decree. For instance, the authors argue, new learning management systems are often presented to faculty as across-the-board, time-saving solutions for all, not as the political flashpoints they should be. For these authors, educational technology tends to "seek constrained truth for the advantage of specific powers that be" (3), just as the simplest app constrains as it empowers.

Several key assumptions and at least one conclusion here might irk some readers. First is the assumption that face-to-face education is superior to online education, with very limited exceptions. The authors assert that the work that happens between people in classrooms produces more critical thinking, and therefore more meaningful learning than most experiences online. This reader agrees, but not all will. Another assumption is that faculty will have the ability (or the interest) to keep current with new technologies and will have

institutional support in using the ones they choose, a lofty goal on both counts. Few faculty have the time to school themselves on emerging technologies, and pressures such as student evaluations reward conformity. These authors conclude, quite rightly, that faculty jobs are in danger because of the "the kind of university governance that makes this kind of [edtech] abuse possible" (37). This book highlights many issues that raise concern (not least, the rise of "instructional designers"), but we do not yet know that student learning suffers in this tech-heavy environment. The authors focus more on academic freedom and far less on student learning.

Poritz and Rees are correct that educational technology – with its unbundling and deskilling and administrative oversight – threatens academic freedom and the autonomy of thought we hope to teach our students. It invites monitoring and assessment that faculty should resist; at the very least, teachers should consider at length the costs of simplifying their teaching lives through technology. "At the risk of sounding alarmist" (74), faculty in all disciplines should read this book. Even those who resist as much as possible should be aware of the changing landscape. We gain and lose in the decisions that we make, but we stand to lose more from decisions made for us.

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