

Book Review

A review of *Questioning Technology: Electronic Technologies and Educational Reform*, by Karen Ferneding, 2003. New York: Peter Lang. 274 pp. ISBN: 0820450472. \$29.95 USD.

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I spent the recent Christmas holiday with family at a frozen prairie lake surrounded by snow-covered hills. Aside from the sound of the wind that blew across the ice and through the pine trees near the house, there was only silence in the distance. Since we had no access to email or the internet, we forgot about work and study and the week seemed to be a retreat outside of time and away from the urgency of our busy lives. Lying on a hill in the snow and looking at the upturned blue bowl of sky slipping past the horizon in every direction was an invitation to recognize the limits of knowledge that lie beyond language. It provided a pause in which to dream of other ways of working and living beyond what appears to be the inevitable rush of day-to-day activity.

Karen Ferneding's book, *Questioning Technology: Electronic Technologies and Educational Reform*, provided me with a similar stopping point where I was able to step back and assess what has become commonplace in educational settings. She described for me a more expansive view of current educational reform caught up within larger structures of the global market economy. Her writing prompted me to reflect upon how, in my own daily focus about what needs to be done, I had believed that the direction of educational reform was inevitable. I was starting to be embarrassed by my own questions that in my day-to-day work seemed to slow down the rushed strategic planning in local and provincial meetings. The current climate of reform does not include opportunities to ask questions that depart from already-determined views. Unfortunately, once we accept that everything is already decided for us, that belief triggers feedback loops which only intensify the grip of language that names and categorizes everything as already-known.

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Although Ferneding is writing about American educational reform politics, her descriptions resonate strongly with growing trends that I have experienced in Canadian K-12 systems over the past 15 years. Anyone currently working within educational systems will be familiar with the pervasive sense of urgency involved in survey responses, forms, student and goal outcomes that are needed to respond to the insatiable demand for statistics, accountability and productivity. Being caught up in the panic to receive and produce information seems to signify that we are excelling in our work and in Ferneding's opinion, convinces us of the seemingly, inevitable need for electronically produced information. Speed and control are emphasized constituting a kind of benign system of control in which there is no time for careful consideration regarding what matters most about public education. This current obsession with speed and control impacts the lives of K-12 teachers as well as those involved in educational research settings. A recent survey by Menzies and Newson of Carlton University (Schmidt, 2006) indicates that university professors in Canada are feeling increasingly distracted by the amount of technology-generated information and communication directed at them. Not only is new knowledge that could arise from deep reading and reflective consciousness lost, the dehumanizing lack of attention paid to lived experiences of teachers' and students' lives makes them ultimately unsustainable. Encased in a social structure that is fit for machinery, we might wonder if our plight will be similar to that of John Henry who, in folklore, so freely signed his life away by trying to outperform the steam drill.

In addition to electronic technologies' associated time pressure, there is a demand for technology access that overrides other concerns. Providing student access to information through electronic technology has become more important than the many economic and social needs in our schools and it is even more important than the content of the information or how it reconfigures public education. Allocations of huge amounts of money into communication and information technologies are assigned at the expense of instructional resources, teachers' aids, and the arts. Educational reform is emphasizing efficiency, a rapid infusion of electronic technologies, and an overarching utopianism for the "technological fix." Those who are unconvinced that higher productivity is better or meets the social purpose of educating literate and social citizens cannot speak. There is a feeling that what is happening is beyond our control and so, amidst the urgency, a certain passivity has begun to grow regarding our own helplessness in making any change in tomorrow's society. John Ralston Saul (1995) identifies this western weakness for "quick-fix" ideologies and our corresponding inability to recognize ideology, as such, when we are in its grip.

Ferneding describes how technologies function as social structures, as background features that help define or regulate patterns of human interaction like laws or systems of cultural beliefs. Social structures are usually understood as contingent, in that other possibilities are possible. However, people often perceive society's technologies as inevitable. An apolitical "technological fix" has the political advantage of neatly fitting into the context of a commonly understood cultural bias about technology always meaning progress, and therefore, the inevitability of a technology-based policy goes unquestioned. Technological determinism embraces conditions brought on by

technological change without judging them in advance. As Winner (1986) notes, because technological innovation is inextricably linked to processes of social reconstruction, “our instruments are institutions in the making” (Ferneding, p.11).

An ecologically balanced view acknowledges education as nested within a much larger level of complex socio-political, economic organization. Within this grander dynamic, Ferneding presents an even-higher stakes argument for a sustainable society in which open space remains for pluralistic dialogue and ongoing debate regarding the purpose of public education. Educational reform discourse has always consisted of a struggle between two broad perspectives: commitment to building a democratic society focusing on equity and participatory politics and alternatively, the more pragmatic interests of serving national and economic needs. The latter has secured and maintained dominance since the beginning of the 20th century and this functionalist orientation and spirit of vocationalism elevates free markets and competition and promotes efficiency and preparation for a computerized workplace.

Ferneding argues that it is not the messy political act of debate between these two approaches that characterizes the problem concerning current reform efforts. She maintains that it is the “lack of a pluralistic dialogue—a silence that arises from the assumption of ‘certain inevitabilities’” (p. 6). This discourse of inevitability serves to frame the act of social and political discourse, delineated by predetermined ends and means. The issue of education reform has been depoliticized in school districts. A response to “crisis” with the language of inevitability shuts down those who sense that things aren’t exactly right. The subsequent closure or narrowing of divergent views raises questions about democratic process and education’s existence as a viable site for public debate. Technical rationalism and its apoliticalness create a void into which we can then provide a fix, an answer, a best practice. Maxine Greene is quoted (in Ferneding, p.78) describing how the narrowing of reform discourse characterized by instrumental rationality closes down spaces for alternative perspectives.

Questioning Technology clarifies the need for a political framework that understands the relationship between technology and society in a way that disengages the question of how we simply accomplish our goals, and instead, equally consider ethical and socially based questions including what it means to be human. She invites a calmer, more responsible attitude to technological change, an ecological model of technology adoption that will support each component and consider both negative and positive effects of each. Instead of correlating with the structure of the economy and information systems, it will approach technologies as things that come and go and democratic basics as things that should persist (Saul, 1995).

As we return from our winter break, we might reconsider a cultural, life-giving approach to both technology adoption and educational reform in which we imagine and build technical regimes compatible with freedom, social justice and democracy. This book defines the importance of expressing a democratically inspired vision, not the typical top-down visioning that takes place in school environments defined by values arising from a business administration framework and carried out by administrators and experts but rather, one that invites all voices in studying existing circumstances toward

the goal of imagining what could be. This is a notion that fits well with complexity's interest in emergent macrobehaviours that arise through localized rules and actions of individual agents. Ferneding argues for such a reanimation of the dialectic of educational reform policy in which questions of human purpose and social vision can once again become a viable part of the discourse:

What is at stake here is possibility itself. But the discourse of possibility, a specific discourse that serves to reanimate the lost narrative of social justice, can emerge as an articulation of an alternative narrative to the received technocentric narrative of policy elites only through the process of discourse. (p. 244)

Her book writes possibility back into our lives, giving us an open-horizon stopping-moment to question how public education might address human qualities, like reason and ethics and creativity, that Saul argues (1995), can only be defined in their relationship to each other and not used as absolute measurable values in themselves. Although a transition to a sustainable way of life works against dominant reform discourse, the new knowledge and ancient wisdom in current complexity thinking offers an opportunity to consider human interactions not as intentionally prefigured but rather, in the same way we consider biological interactions, which Brian Massumi (2002) describe as, "rhythmically re-fused in a way that always brings something new and unexpected into the loop" (p. 191). Education does not hold the entire responsibility for society but it is a good place to begin with educating and making sense of our humanity in a way that embraces a sustainable "lifeworld." Karen Ferneding asks us to begin by "questioning technology."

References

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