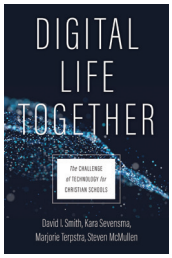
Digital Life Together: The Challenge of Technology for Christian Schools

David I. Smith, Kara Sevensma, Marjorie Terpstra & Steven McMullen. (2020). Eerdmans, 348 pages.
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According to Mark Scott[1], "Since the time of the ancient Greeks, this is what great education has been all about. Asking the right questions. Challenging the assumptions. Seeking insights and understanding. Searching for the why" (Scott, 2019b, para. 4). He laments that these are things we have failed to do when confronted with embracing technology in schools. He asserts that, "What good teachers are always ready to do is demand a hypothesis. Challenge the assumptions using the evidence" (p.18). This is especially relevant where technology is concerned as its progress is "hardly predictable or linear" (p.18).

This book's resonance with Scott's thoughts is firstly apparent in the *Table of Contents* where "The Shifting Landscape" is how the challenge of technology for Christian schools is introduced, and following an extensive research undertaking, "The Finishing Line Keeps Moving" is its conclusion. This is the landscape in which teachers have to use faith to inform their pedagogical processes. Yet for many, this landscape is neither the one in which they trained, nor were students themselves, so to educate in this context requires reimagining.

Digital Life Together overcomes the failures Scott lamented, as it reports on a large-scale investigation into technological change in relation to education – more specifically – in how digital technologically mediated education matches, or not, the mission and vision of education in Christian Schools; how it is impacting Christian education. This is done by providing the background, methods of data collection, analyses, findings and conclusions related to a multi-yeared, in-depth empirical study reporting on a group of Christian schools that had implemented one-to-one computer programs, and how technology interacted with faith and learning in the context of these programs for these Christian schools.

An important aspect of the study was the mixture of methods used to collect information, with surveys, focus groups across the school community, case studies, classroom observations, in-depth interviews, school records and artefacts, all employed to examine the real impact of technology on Christian learning. This enabled the authors to provide more than surface-level tips and techniques, imparting deep Christian wisdom about technology use in the Christian classroom within the domains of mission, teaching, learning, discernment, formation, and community. An apposite example of how faith can inform pedagogical processes was in the area of discernment. While parents feared the moral degradation of their children through online engagement, they were not concerned about the most distracting element of the internet for their children - shopping. Closer investigation showed that this was not a "good" aspect of their online experience. Materialism is not a characteristic one would expect faith informed pedagogy in a Christian school to promote, but by technology allowing tasks to be completed more quickly and providing access to the internet, digitally mediated lessons availed students of the opportunity to shop. Thinking anew led to the reshaped practice of having two/three students share computers which led to greater focus and engagement, and opportunity for connection and community rather than isolation, which was more suggestive of a faith informed pedagogical process.

It was consistently apparent throughout the book that the range of data collected provided opportunities for triangulation, to clarify findings, and to establish internal consistency. In Part 3, for example, with regard to digital technology's capacity to differentiate learning and enhance the success of all learners, "Survey data showed both teachers and students affirmed gains… and observational evidence confirmed this" (p.136). These benefits were in both academic achievement and inclusion, illustrating the examination of digital technology in relation to enhancing faith-based

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requirements such as inclusion and community, beyond it just being an academic tool. Digital technology as a means for reaching out into the world, discussed in Part 5, also illustrated the benefit of corroboration of input from more than one source. Successful examples of student formation through outreach were found to be repeated in different groups, inflating their apparent occurrence, revealing they were not representative of the average school experience. Reporting less positive results was very helpful. It made the process reported by the book attainable, that is, looking at one's own context, the school's mission and what it envisions, and whether digital technology-based practice is missionally aligned and is enriching Christian formation and community. The author's method of parsing the Modern Christian School's mission statement provided an excellent example of how to consider digital impact on one's own Christian education practices and that of one's school. The thought-provoking questions at the end of each chapter were similarly beneficial.

The mixed method allowed the readers to see the findings as confirmable, credible, and dependable, which importantly made them transferable to contexts beyond the cohort of schools investigated (e.g. Devault, 2019) with higher confidence. As J. K.A. Smith (2020) noted, the book's content is, "Rooted in empirical research rather than anecdotal impressions", which, "helps us learn from what is happening to better frame what we hope might happen" (Editorial Reviews – 3). TEACH

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