

BOOK REVIEWS

Digital Life Together: The Challenge of Technology for Christian Schools

David I. Smith, Kara Sevensma, Marjorie Terpstra & Steven McMullen. (2020). Eerdmans, 348

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According to Mark Scott¹, “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-year, 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 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



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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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The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education. 2nd edition

Walter Brueggemann. (2015).
Augsburg Fortress Press, 216 pages. Kindle Edition.
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Brueggemann's text (Brueggemann, 2015) is substantial. A skim through on Kindle suggested it was heavily theological - not an easy to read practical guide to Christian teaching. My perseverance with the book, which I have since found very instructive, came from one of the paragraphs I had initially highlighted:

The juxtaposition of ethos, which assures, pathos, which wrenches, and logos, which instructs, is crucial. The practices of disclosure, disruption, and discernment all are important in faithful living. The life of faith consists in treasuring the consensus, breaking the consensus with new truth, and valuing new experience in tension with the tradition of experience. (Loc. 2556)¹

I could see this aligning with *What If Learning's* (n.d.) strategies of "Seeing Anew", "Choosing Engagement" and "Reshaping Practice" and my interest was piqued.

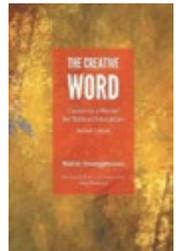
Brueggemann draws on the Hebrew Bible's canon, its tripartite division of the Old Testament - Torah-Prophets-Writings (Jer.18:18), as a framework for education/formation – for God's words to be spoken afresh and for faithfully handing down the living tradition. He draws on obedience as a common mode of knowledge across the three strands of God's ethos, pathos and logos; that trust and obedience to a holy "Thou" is the locus of education. This should

¹The reason that location numbers are used instead of page numbers is that the user can adjust the size of the text, but that might result in the book being fewer or more "pages," so location numbers are more accurate for locating a particular spot in the book. (Quora, n.d.)

inform faith based pedagogical processes - that they reveal trust and obedience to God whether teaching the treasured consensus – our Biblical foundations; the disruption in thinking that the Prophets encapsulate; or the importance of discernment that the Writings with their wisdom focus encourages. Brueggemann argues each part serves a distinctive theological and educational function.

The Torah treasures consensus providing the sure and undoubted disclosure of God's purpose for his people. This addresses the importance to education of having knowledge to work on and knowledge that is certain. Students cannot build on their learning without foundational knowledge first (Hattie, 2019). Seeing anew is present in terms of the structure of presentation, ensuring that God's word is spoken afresh - not fossilized (Loc. 138). This innovativeness requires flexibility as well as fidelity, a freedom of imagination which operates in context. Choice might be available as to how the story, and it "must characteristically be a story" (Loc. 6750), is contextually framed for it to be engaging. However, the content must be of the intervention of the one true, holy God. The context may require that practice be reshaped to use YouTube rather than a becloaked ancient Israelite leader teaching a multitude in person, but the content must not be altered. This steadfastness helps students define themselves against the other cultures of today, to guard against syncretism (Loc.1053).

The prophets thinking of, "Yes, but what if ...", is where debate comes in. The disruptive word of the prophets, shatters consensus (e.g. royal realities) and leads to a giving of new truth - to exploring a skepticism toward authority and tradition – to thinking anew. In the same way that the prophets speak God's alternative word, education in the prophetic means to nurture people in an openness to alternative imagination which never quite perceives the world in the way of the dominant reality. To recognise, for example, that just because I am a nice teacher with a Christian worldview and teach using the scriptures, does not mean that my pedagogy is faith enhancing. If I value competition and completion over community and connection, then I need to think anew, choosing to be engaging and reshaping practice, accordingly. This is the tension between the Torah and the prophets which Brueggemann considers must always be attended to in education - the tension between



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establishing or asserting the consensus, then raising questions which challenge it.

In the writings, the practice of discernment that attends both to the connections and to the incongruities of God's created order, to wisdom, the readiness both to penetrate the mystery of the order of life, at times available and at times hidden, and to live obediently with its inscrutability. This recommends that we study the world, to try to figure out God's creation, but that we recognise the interconnectedness we see is the tip of the iceberg and acknowledge that this hiddenness means we will never fathom it all. We need to teach that those who say we can 'fathom it all' should be approached with caution, e.g. using the internet sagaciously. This speaks to reshaping practice, especially if there is a tendency in our teaching to be constrained by the Torah, by the kind of certitude that believes all of the important questions are settled. Brueggemann encourages that all three modes—ethos, pathos and logos - be equally considered to avoid disequilibrium (Loc. 2921).

Brueggemann concludes by establishing that it is the simple claim of trust and obedience that is the commonality that draws God's ethos, pathos and logos together. Moving from certitude (Torah) to disruption by 'new truths' (Prophets) to settling down with the mundane and the mystery (Writings) (Tan, 2020), all require obedience (Ezek.,36:27) and the compelling wisdom—or this is the fear of the Lord (Job,28:28). **TEACH**

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