Adult Learning in the Digital Age: Information Technology and the Learning Society by Neil Selwyn, Stephen Gorard and John Furlong, Routledge, London, 2006, 229 pages.

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Much of the discourse around technology-based learning is based on some untested and dubious assumptions. If we are to believe its proponents, technology-based learning will make lifelong learning more accessible, will lead to more cost-effective learning, and will contribute to economic development by allowing our workforce to stay current (Bates, 2000; Bates & Poole, 2003). Adult learning in the digital age reports on what the authors claim is the first large-scale research study to examine these assumptions. In doing so, it provides a refreshing counterbalance to the prevailing discourses of techno-utopianism and techno-zealotry (Boshier, 2000).

The rationale for the research study (and the book) is what the authors perceive to be a lack of any empirical basis for the claims that have been made about the impact of technology-based approaches on adult learning. "Within the existing literature we found that key questions of who is using ICTs for what purposes and with what outcomes remained largely unanswered. Academic understandings of who was not using ICT and why they were not doing so were even vaguer" (x). With that in mind the study was guided by two key questions:

1. In what ways does access to ICT in the home, workplace and other community settings contribute to learning amongst adults?
2. To what extent does the use of ICT interrupt or reinforce existing patterns of participation in lifelong learning?

The research was conducted in the UK using a mixed-methods approach that involved three stages of data collection: (i) a large-scale household survey, (ii) semi-structured in-depth interviews; and (iii) year-long ethnographic case-studies of adult learners, friends and family. What emerges in the eleven chapters is a compelling case for how technology had done little to change the fundamentals of adult learning. Contrary to prevailing techno-utopic discourse, the evidence from this study suggests there has not been a paradigm shift. While new technologies are being used for educational activity, "there is little 'special' or 'new' about adult learning in the digital age. As with education in general, ICT-based

learning struggles to be part of everyday life". Use of ICTs for learning purposes remains a secondary concern for most users with more practical tasks such as communication, document production, and information searching taking priority. More importantly, the data suggests that ICTs actually reinforce existing patterns of participation rather than broadening access. In other words ICTs are benefiting those who already participate in formal lifelong learning.

But are these findings really that surprising? While improving access and changing the historical patterns of participation are important social issues, few educators seriously consider technology-based learning to be a magic bullet solution. As the authors point out, there are complex socio-economic and political issues underlying this problem. Technology-based learning approaches will not make learners out of non-learners but if the underlying causes of non participation are addressed then ICT-based learning can help by providing for more flexible access.

Perhaps the most interesting findings to emerge from this study are those that deal with how ICTs are being used for informal learning. The data clearly suggest that educational uses of ICTs are not common and that computers were used far more frequently for non-educational purposes. While this is not particularly surprising, what is fascinating is that among the minority of educational users identified in the study, most were using ICTs for informal, rather than formal learning. Tough (1978) was one of the first to draw the attention of adult educators to the importance of informal learning, calling it the submerged iceberg of adult learning and arguing that adult educators needed to recognize its value and devote more time to understanding it. This study supports that view and confirms an emerging discourse in the e-learning blogosphere around the notion of the personal learning environment and how Web 2.0 technologies support informal learning through networking.

Another intriguing finding to emerge from this study is the notion of digital choice as opposed to digital divide. The digital divide assumes that socio-economic circumstances present barriers to accessing ICTs for a significant number of people, particularly in developing countries, but also in the developed world. A lot of attention has been focused on how to eliminate the divide. But this study suggests that in many cases, lack of use of ICTs is a matter of choice and not due to insurmountable socio-economic barriers. "To assume that non-use of ICTs is due to the individual concerned being somehow prevented from doing so is to ignore the subtleties of the interactions behind the (non)use of technology" (181). The data from this study confirm other research, which suggests many adults are simply not interested in ICT-based activities and are choosing not to engage even though they may have the capability of doing so.

While one of the key assumptions underlying this study (that ICT-based learning could, by itself, improve participation levels) may be a bit naïve, the book does, nonetheless, make a valuable contribution to our understanding of how adults are using and thinking about technology-based learning. It is a well organized and well written volume that should appeal to adult educators with an interest in technology-based learning.

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