

EdTech Inc.: Selling, Automating and Globalizing Higher Education in the Digital Age, by Tanner Mirrlees and Shahid Alvi

Routledge. 2020. pp. 190.
ISBN: 978-036735989-8

Reviewed by Aziz Choudry

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4289-7904>
McGill University, Canada
aziz.choudry@mcgill.ca

Reading University of Ontario Institute of Technology professors Tanner Mirrlees and Shahid Alvi’s co-authored book, *EdTech Inc.*, several months into a global pandemic when many schools, colleges and universities in many countries are—at least in theory—engaged in remote teaching and learning highlights the urgency and relevance of their critical analysis.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, this book would have served as a timely, well-researched and compelling corrective to claims that digital technologies have “revolutionised” education. It is a welcome counterbalance to the uncritical technoutopianism and techno-optimism held by many educators, development practitioners and policy-makers concerning EdTech—digital technology in education—not to mention the evangelical zeal of marketing strategies of companies that sell and richly profit from these technologies, including the “big five” of EdTech (Apple, Alphabet Inc., Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook) and EdTech start-ups. By the end of 2019, the EdTech industry was expected to reach US \$43 billion in value. At the start of this book, the authors warn that “[t]oo often, immersion in the EdTech hype cycle distracts from the real economic and political structures, institutions and interests that are shaping and attempting to benefit from EdTech’s development, diffusion, application and impact in society” (5).

The EdTech sector has effectively mobilised in and greatly benefitted from the kind of disaster capitalism ascendant during the COVID-19 era. The pandemic has given a huge



UNISA
Education as Change
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>
Volume 24 | 2020 | #8380 | 4 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/8380>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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boost to the sector, with the companies that sell and promote these products and platforms, alongside state agencies and educational institutions, public and private alike, bulldozing or sidelining critical perspectives, all justified through commitments to the provision of education during a pandemic, and further aided by the climate of fear and crisis that has engulfed so many.

Through a critical appraisal of capitalist relations, interconnecting the histories of higher education, the neoliberal state, technology and automation, the book pushes back at the idea that all of this is inevitable and that resistance to (or even critique of) EdTech is futile and/or a sign of being a fossil who can't keep up with times that are a-changing. Indeed, as universities increasingly model themselves on corporations, the book's authors contend that EdTech is treated "as though it has a life of its own to fundamentally transform the qualities of educational institutions while mystifying the real neoliberal restructuring of higher education, and the expanding EdTech industry's agenda to sell digital technology to enhance the bottom line" (69). How much more so, as education, teaching and learning are further reorganised in pandemic times? The kinds of sober and critical perspectives and questions posed about educational technology that Mirrlees and Alvi, Neil Selwyn (2014) and others have urged us to take seriously quickly fly out of the window, if they were ever in the room in the first place.

Divided into six chapters, *EdTech Inc.* digs deeply into and under the digital platform industries' emergence from and role in the restructuring of capitalism, and in turn puts their interrelationships with higher education under the spotlight. Strongly critical of the "digital revolution" euphoria and technological determinism, Mirrlees and Alvi argue that if we attend to the social, economic and political context within which EdTech has been produced, we see a reorganisation and perpetuation of existing capitalist social relations and inequities rather than a disruption or break with the past. Adopting a historically informed, critical political economy of communications framework of analysis as it historicises and dissects the reshaping of higher education, technology and the interrelations of states, capital and higher education, this book is a must-read for anybody teaching, studying or working in colleges and universities, including school teachers contending with an "online learning environment". It is an important reference for education, humanities and social science researchers and administrators—including Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) aficionados of various kinds.

The book is written in an accessible, readable style. For example, in drawing from Marxist theory to understand contemporary capitalism, I appreciated the explanation of key concepts and the spelling out of characteristics of EdTech and the global economy as much as the political economy mapping of the EdTech terrain and actors. Thus the book will likely appeal to both experienced researchers and students alike, across a range of disciplines.

The book asks how the excitement and urgency that clothe so much of the EdTech talk connect to the material conditions and realities of a deeply unequal world. Mirrlees and

Alvi remind us that “[f]ar from being inclusive of all, Internet access—and access to EdTech—is stratified, both geographically and socially. The reality of the digital divide—lack of access to the Internet, a digital device and digital literacy—within and between countries deflates the naïve hope that EdTech corporations will provide everyone everywhere with quick access to a free, high-quality and empowering education” (105). I think the book could usefully engage with Ruha Benjamin’s (2019) excellent scholarship on racism, science and technology, and Safiya Noble’s (2018) work on how commercial search engines—and the algorithms they use—reinforce racism. An aspect of the ways in which US-dominated EdTech industries perpetuate media and knowledge imperialism is surely their capacity to reinforce white supremacy. Michael Kwet’s (2019) recent work on digital colonialism also comes to mind here.

Although the book draws on many US and Canadian examples, I appreciated the efforts to explore the global dimensions of EdTech from a number of angles. Chapter 5, “Globalizing Higher Education: Platform Imperialism” considers EdTech as a key aspect of US media and platform imperialism. Given the ways in which digital technology, education and development are connected, and how in turn the globalisation of US higher education and EdTech aligns with and supports US economic and geopolitical interests, we see the latest chapter in a much longer history of US media and education as soft power throughout the world. Alongside this, the book notes the profitability of data collection through digital education platforms with the dataveillance of students and other participants yielding a goldmine of lucrative personal details, online activities, interests and content that can be commercialised.

The implications for academic labour of education “going digital” are also central to the book. We are reminded of the harsh working conditions in the production of EdTech products (e.g. Apple/Foxconn workers in China) through to the attendant precarisation of academic labour, and the Taylorisation of academic work via the expansion of massive open online courses (MOOCs), coupled with the restructuring of higher education that was already underway. The drive to make course delivery more “efficient” by automating instruction, the authors argue, leads to the deskilling, displacement and obsolescence of professors and the reconfiguration of academic labour, for example through standardised audio-video recordings of lectures that can be reproduced and transmitted without instructors needing to be present after they have uploaded their knowledge into an online platform that they do not control.

Then there is the question of the quality of the learning that the techno-solutionist expansion into public education facilitates. Mirrlees and Alvi, in tandem with many critical educationalists, see the erosion of learning that sparks and sustains critical thinking and values dialogical processes among teachers and students, discussion and human interaction. The trend is very much towards top-down, didactic instruction and the further construction (and they argue the subalternisation) of students as consumers. “The idea of the lone, self-motivated young scholar learning from a laptop and then having a eureka moment is at once myth and farce” (124), they contend. This becomes

evident when we consider who has access to laptops, smartphones and other digital devices, the internet and data, and even a reliable power supply.

Notwithstanding its sombre assessment of the implications for a restructured, commodified and market-driven landscape of higher education and digital technology, *EdTech Inc.* ends on some notes of hope. Throughout the book, we are reminded that even in the bleakest of periods there have always been struggles, movements and dissent that have pushed back at economic and political elites and the systems maintaining their power. In doing so, the authors urge that resistance is still possible within higher education and remind us of the power of critical learning and the education praxis of face-to-face dialogical educational encounters. In their words, “[t]he pedagogy of the precariat working class compels the professor-workers to have dialogical, personalized and face-to-face exchanges with student-workers, in this case, everyone we meet and teach” (137).

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