

## Book Reviews/Recensions

### ***ADULT LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE LEARNING SOCIETY***

Neil Selwyn, Stephen Gorard, and John Furlong. (2006). Routledge, London, 229 pages

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, lead to more cost-effective learning, and 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 technoutopianism and techno-zealotry (Boshier & Onn, 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 [information and communication technologies] 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”. 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 United Kingdom using a mixed-methods approach that involved three stages of data collection: (a) a large-scale household survey, (b) semi-structured, in-depth interviews; and (c) year-long ethnographic case studies of adult learners, friends, and family. What emerges in the 11 chapters is a compelling case for how technology has 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, for whom more practical tasks—such as communication, document production, and information searching—take priority. More importantly, the data suggest that ICTs actually reinforce existing patterns of participation rather than broaden 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, complex socio-economic and political issues underlie this problem. Technology-based learning approaches will not make learners out of non-learners, but if the underlying causes of non-participation are addressed, ICT-based learning can help by providing 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 are 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 access to 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 is 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” (p. 181). The data from this study confirm other research that 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.

### References

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## ***VALUING LITERACY—RHETORIC OR REALITY?***

Nayda Veeman, Angela Ward, and Keith Walker. (2006). Detselig Enterprises Ltd., Calgary, Alberta, 132 pages.

*Valuing Literacy—Rhetoric or Reality?* resounds with a realistic, socially conscious assessment of the status of literacy education in Canada. It merits reading and discussion by the groups that the authors endeavour to address; that is, policy-makers at various levels of government, community decision-makers, and educators in both the K–12 public school system and adult education programs.

For days after reading this book, I was compelled to revisit my own experiences as an instructor/learning facilitator in adult basic education and academic upgrading since 1981. I think the authors have comprehensively depicted the literacy scene in Canada, so their book will likely have a revitalizing effect on many readers who have been involved in basic adult education during the decades preceding and following the International Year of Literacy in 1990, when literacy was much talked about across our nation.

The authors write in an accessible style. They have included personal stories of learners, which are interesting, yet similar to those I have heard in person through my work. The authors’ own profiles are written in plain English. If there is anything that presents a challenge in the reading, it is the vastness of the issues and learners’ circumstances that the authors touch upon. They take a historical and international view on literacy programs, political policy frameworks, and theories regarding learning. These sections of the book are rather complex and require careful reading.

The cover of *Valuing Literacy*, with its bright flags of Canada and Sweden, suggests that this book revolves upon a comparison of the two Western countries’ educational policies, and, to a great extent, it does—but be prepared to be taken on other international routes as well. I feel that the authors’ aim is to address the obstacles to learning for adults in Canada through highlighting what works best in Sweden, which has offered universal adult education to its citizens and scored higher than Canada in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The authors imply that we can learn from Sweden’s national policies, but they clearly indicate the need for Canadians to develop a unique national strategy.

They invite dialogue to instigate action, so that an increasing number of adults in Canada have opportunities to learn with others, not in isolation, and with the financial and community supports to do so for an unrestricted time. The authors emphasize changing our national mindset to normalize the idea of publicly funded adult education as a dignified right. However, they recognize some hurdles. The authors conclude that, in