16.3: A review from a digital education perspective: Digital Education Strategies, Ryerson University

By Leonora Zefi and the team at Digital Education Strategies, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

As a team dedicated to supporting instructors in using educational technology as a vehicle for instruction, our collective review of Tony Bates' latest work, *Teaching in a Digital Age*, has been anchored in the practical realities of supporting pedagogical change in higher education. After decades of contributions to the evolving knowledge base and discourse around educational technology, including twelve texts related to the subject, Bates has now provided educators worldwide with the gift of a resource for moving forward in somewhat perplexing times. This book is a model in many respects. It is published in open format – an increasingly adopted, if somewhat debated, mode of knowledge dissemination with which anyone in research and education today must familiarize themselves.

Bates (2014) offers the book as a “coach” to support instructors in fostering the required “thinking and knowledge” for student success in learning environments that are increasingly impacted by technology (p. 1). The work lives up to this coaching analogy to the extent that it offers a rounded and realistic training regimen of sorts, to help strengthen the instructional design and decision making skills of instructors and educational administrators; however, just as the artifacts and content of technology-enhanced teaching must be strategically organized and presented to best support learners, Bates’ ideas and commentary require further organization and clarification to optimize their benefit to his audience.

One of the greatest strengths of *Teaching in a Digital Age* is that Bates “walks the talk” of active facilitation of learning rather than the passive transmission of knowledge. From the very beginning, Bates makes clear why his selected topics and stated objectives matter and how they will make a meaningful difference in the professional practice of his intended audience. To support his own work and observations, he guides readers, through references and web links, to many...
valuable, supplementary resources. He brings theories and concepts alive through vignette-like scenarios, practical real-world examples, and case studies from a range of institutions of higher education. Like any good facilitator, Bates presents content in a range of formats, including text and rich media such as videos, photos, diagrams and illustrations. Learning activities and reflective questions motivate readers to immediately apply Bates’ ideas to their own work and context. As such, the book is a tremendous primer in effective pedagogy for all modes of teaching and learning.

Chapters 6 to 8 of *Teaching in a Digital Age* guide the reader through the world of educational technology and new media. For instructors and course designers who are exploring different media to enhance their courses, these chapters are “must reads.” Bates presents his previously published SECTIONS model as a framework for when, how and why media should be used in instruction, and realistically conveys the complications that can surround its implementation. While these chapters are comprehensive and provide varied practical supports to decision making, the book would benefit from additional examination of issues such as the impact of mobile technologies on media selection and compliance requirements for accessibility.

It may be that Bates’ strategic choice of an open and transparent authoring process precipitated certain challenges to organization and clarity for the book. Prior to its official launch, the book was circulated for feedback among Bates’ colleagues and, through his blog, the wider professional community. The type of commentary emerging from these consultations, while undeniably valuable, cannot replace the adept, professional editing that typically accompanies commercial publishing. For example, after establishing a solid theoretical and practical foundation in teaching theory and methods in Chapters 1 to 4, Bates offers a full and lengthy chapter examining the unavoidable and controversial topic of Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs (Chapter 5). There is no question that a book such as this one should acknowledge and examine this trend, given its extensive reach and impact on the field (and Bates does so throughout many of his other chapters); however, the flow of the book would be well served if some of his key messages from Chapter 5 could be redistributed where relevant throughout the book. Similarly, Chapter 9, which looks at modes of delivery, might integrate more effectively if placed earlier in the book, i.e., adjacent to the chapters on teaching methods (Chapters 3 and 4). Additionally, the “Key Takeaways” section – a very helpful feature of the book – is provided at both the beginning and the end of each chapter. Offering just one instance of this section, at the end of each chapter, might help to streamline the content. Addressing issues of sequencing and repetition such as these will enhance the overall impact of Bates’ message.

Having identified some highlights and drawbacks of the book, the fact remains that Bates has shared his singular abundance of knowledge in an engaging and accessible way. Readers who may not be familiar with his earlier publications are brought up to speed with key issues to consider in the area of educational technology, while loyal followers of his past work will find Bates’ analysis of the current state of the field to be as helpful and practical as ever. Ultimately, because of the book’s open format, readers may take from it that which best suits their own learning needs, their professional style and their teaching context. In fact, Bates states in the Introduction that there are many ways in which the book may be used. Given that Bates has acknowledged the book as a “work in progress”, some additional attention to the organization and sequencing of his materials will help to ensure that readers gain equal value from each and every element of the work.

A sign of true passion for one’s life’s work is an unfailing commitment to the advancement and evolution of the field. Tony Bates is an outstanding example of this type of passion and demonstrates it through this book and through his dedication to its continuous improvement.