

The Problem with Education Technology (Hint: It's Not the Technology)

Ben Fink and Robin Brown. 2016. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press. [ISBN 978-1-60732-446-1. 146 pages. USD\$6.99 (softcover).]



Fink and Brown's thin volume is written so well that reading it a second time is as interesting and engaging as the first. With lines like, "What is a 'paper,' exactly? Just like pornography: you know it when you see it," who would stop? (p. 24).

While their text touches on multiple topics at the intersection of writing

and technology, the volume's emphasis centers on Automatic Essay Scoring (AES). Fortunately, the authors do not focus just on the artificial nature of AES grading—they move past that and land on the artificial nature of many writing assignments as well as human-based scoring approaches—particularly as they manifest in high-stakes tests like the GRE and SAT.

Their core argument has several pieces. Primarily, machines cannot read and evaluate like experts; instead, the systems only find the signifiers or variables that they are told experts seek as indicators of writing capacity and ability. This claim gains power when the authors hone in on the Education Technology Services (ETS) raters take by focusing on the essay's form rather than their claims or arguments. This is done with human raters, the authors point out, and that is key to the problem of AES and automation. "The problem with the machine isn't about the machine. It's about how humans (in this case, standardized test raters) got turned into machines. And how these mechanized humans became accepted as the 'experts' for the machines to (easily) emulate" (p. 12).

The text is accessible, friendly, and familiar—especially for writers or writing teachers. It floats lightly and deftly. Unfortunately, the authors employ a straw man: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Discussing mostly the profit and student extraction aspects of MOOCs and the role that AES has in them offers a limited view. Sadly, they overlook writing which takes place in MOOCs: forums, messaging, and social media. This writing is neither easy to track or evaluate; pretending that this real writing for real audiences does not emerge in many MOOCs is problematic. Equally problematic is ignoring MOOCs like #clMOOC where

goals are explicitly around professional development and multimedia authoring; lifelong learning, not the degree, drive those MOOCs. MOOCs are not the enemy. The desire to extract profit and capitalize on every possible interaction with students should remain the authors' target. Automatic grading enables such extraction and increases profits for academic administrations and the EdTech companies they hire.

The Problem with Education Technology ends with hope. It centers on the importance of organizing with groups beyond writing teachers. The goal is to limit the juggernaut of high stakes testing—a powerful force that is helping fund, in terms of political clout, time, and money—a juggernaut that is increasingly reliant upon the automatic grading (by humans or computers) of writing which should be, in stark contrast, thoughtful, powerful, engaging, and not limited to a select set of structural and rhetorical moves.

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FrameMaker – Creating and Publishing Content

Matt R. Sullivan. 2015. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Tech Comm Tools. [ISBN 978-0-9967157-9-9. 592 pages, including index. USD\$49.99 (softcover).]



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