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Book Review: Digital Life Together: The Challenge of Technology for Christian Schools

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Keywords

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Smith, David I, Sevensma, Kara, Terpstra, Marjorie, & McMullen, Steven. (2020). *Digital Life Together : The Challenge of Technology for Christian Schools*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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Abstract

In a global and local climate where technology appears to be all invasive, it is pertinent to see the pros, cons, challenges, and possibilities of technology in the field of education. In this text, David Smith, Kara Sevensma, Marjorie Terpstra, and Steven McMullen unfold the significance of deep thinking around the use of technology as this would pertain to education in Christian schools, and to teaching and learning of the students within them. They begin by reminding us that “we shape technology and we are in turn shaped by it in often unexpected ways” (p. 16). A central question in the book is around what technological practices we build and what convictions inform them as we domesticate technology within our beliefs and values (p. 19).

The design of the book is very helpful. Across its 39 chapters, it keeps focus on six themed sections: context, mission, teaching and learning, discernment, formation, and community. Each of these main themes provides an introductory overview and a summary for the chapters within it. The “central focus of research is on understanding how the mission and self-understanding of a Christian school and the formation of its learners interact with new technologies” (p. 10).

In a clearly designed flow, this book returns repeatedly to the aspects of how new technologies may help serve student learning (or not), and the role of Christian discernment in the use of technology regarding practices contributing to student formation; relational intersections that remind the reader that education informs a way of

being, not just of *doing* with technology. As Neil Postman (1993) stated in his book *Technopoly*, a new technology does not just change something; it changes everything, and cannot be taken back. Hence, the topic of this text is of pivotal concern, engaging a past, present, and future perspective of technology and how that affects pedagogy, discernment, and relationships within a community of teachers, students, and parents.

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In this review, I could not possibly serve justice to the whole book. I expect you to buy it and read it to do that. What I can do, is highlight some of the nuggets that I found helpful, perplexing, or yet unresolved, and hopefully begin a conversation for educators that read this review.

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This book engages a very large research project, which encompasses many facets of technology as a tool, as a practice, as an enabler, and as a guide for learning. I would like to focus on three aspects of the book in particular. These are depth, process, and new considerations.

Firstly, I appreciated the depth in which technology as a tool is unwrapped, defined, and is found to be helpful and not so helpful in regard to Christian education in informing and forming a certain kind of citizen who is equipped to serve God, his neighbor, and the world in life giving ways. This missional aspect is well developed and is key to foundational understandings of Christian education. I also appreciate the reminder that teachers educate more than heads on sticks, and that the formation of a human being is key. I did not find as much on the actual result in the area of student formation, but did find the need for it to be abundant in the minds of educators. Despite technology allowing us to do things faster and more efficiently, it does not have a lot to say about what students should be, Christianly, morally, or ethically. It would appear that in these areas, technology is somewhat mute.

Secondly, the process from mission to pedagogy to engagement to ownership of belief in action, reminded me that while mission as a topic has been present for decades, pedagogy to achieve it is constantly in a stage of revision. Educators need to own, model, and consider lovingly student formation in order to move on from head to heart to embodied knowledge. Technology is useful, but is still virtual, and cannot fully embrace real life learning. The argument of how much technology is enough, what it is used for, when to use it, and to what ends is a constantly unfolding question across the breadth of this text.

Thirdly, I am mulling repeatedly over considerations of addiction, discernment, wisdom, and time. One sobering find is that of addiction over time to our many devices. While students seem to be able to maintain distance and flexibly, moving from virtual reality to more engaging aspects for learning when young, they tend to become slaves of their devices the older they become within institutions of learning. Daily life in the classroom has the possibility of becoming more technical and less life giving. Therefore,

choices about when to use technology for learning become a serious consideration in educational landscapes.

Christian discernment is not embedded in a device but must be modelled in the questions and contexts of its use. Although discernment and wisdom are written as being very significant, I would love to have heard more in this regard. It is seen to be a red flag for Christian educators but is not given as much time in the context of teaching and learning in this text, even though it is of primary concern to parents. To be fair, I think this is often an occurrence when any new problem emerges in education. Perhaps this subject requires a text of its own, as it embraces learning in the prism of what students may become as a result of how thinking is engaged and taught. While educators have had decades to consider mission, teaching practices, and engagement in learning, this is a new virtual world dilemma. What is noted in this text is the need to engage in making concepts of discernment and wisdom more prevalent within the task of teaching and learning. In a virtual landscape, wisdom and discernment diminishes, but in real world community relationships, it is sorely needed. Digital citizenship and practices are not the same as real world citizenship and practices, hence they require different skills and different intelligences. Christian educators have never been in this place of straddling two realities at the same time before.

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Another concept of interest raised is that of time, and how the concept of time changes in a digital age. The teaching day now makes teachers accessible at any time of the day or night, on any day of the week, to students, parents, and the larger community. This also impacts formation of both the student, teacher, and parent in new ways. I am still pondering that students who need assistance most due to problems or disabilities are most prone to technological addiction. Knowing when technology is and is not appropriate was well portrayed in this text. Implications for time, workload, and relational engagement are themes I will continue to ponder across the landscape of teaching and learning.

I recommend this book because it asks all the right questions. This book concludes with noting that Christians need to learn how to live together, and technology cannot fulfill that learning goal. What kind of being does our teaching and learning help to create? What are we doing to equip people to become fully human?

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References

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