

Heavy Sledding, But Important Information

Technology and Higher Education,

Edited by Linda Enghagen

Washington, D.C.: The NEA Professional Library Higher Education Series, 1997.

Technology and Higher Education, 1996-97

By Perry M. Robinson

Washington, D.C.: The American Federation of Teachers Higher Education Department, 1997.

Reviewed by Mark A. Benvenuto

The slim volume "Technology and Higher Education," edited by Linda Enghagen is rather formidable reading.

The book summarizes a series of papers presented at the 1994 National Education Association Higher Education Conference—but it isn't the Sahara one might expect at first glance.

Part one "Technology, Teaching, and Learning," and part three "Technophobia Point and Counterpoint," will be of interest to almost all educators.

The second, "The Law and Union Contracts," is probably not as central to the discussion of the improvement of education and the uses of technology. But it does raise some interesting points on copyrighted information and the internet.

As a whole, this volume should make an excellent reference volume for anyone who considers him or herself a professional educator. But it probably should be digested in smaller pieces.

The first chapter, "The Future

of Technology and Education in America," by Vice President Gore is a solid overview of how technology, specifically computers and the internet, can be wisely used in the classroom.

More cynical readers might consider a presentation by an elected official politically biased, but Vice President Gore makes good points, knows what he's writing about, and makes a broad call for improved access for all students.

The remaining chapters of Part One span a number of topics and approaches to the classroom use of various technologies. Chapter three, "Music Technology for the 21st Century" discusses applications of computers to this field that many might not find an obvious connection. The idea of using various presentation programs in Music Theory classes was extremely interesting.

Part two, on copyright, is perhaps the driest reading in the volume simply because of the subject matter, but it raises some good questions. "New Frontiers In Copy-

right Law” makes the point that agreements between parties developing material should be hammered out before an item or teaching tool is created. This may seem obvious to experienced authors, and to software developers, but ask anyone who has been burned in such a development. They will agree this is a point that cannot be made too strongly.

Part two is also a worthwhile read for anyone involved with developing a new piece of learning material that is interactive or multimedia based. While it is not a how-to or blueprint for correct action, it does give good advice for the novice developer.

The final section on technophobia is the most interesting. Both point and counterpoint authors begin with a definition. These authors go a long way toward curing the fear of technology by asking excellent questions about what people want a computer to do for them.

The effect of the two essays is less point-counterpoint and more of one author reinforcing the other two. It's a pity many people who could benefit from this discussion may write it off, thinking it's just more talk about computer fears. A better tag line for each essay was perhaps in order.

All in all, “Technology and Higher Education” makes a number of good points that any college faculty member or secondary school teacher would find useful.

The book doesn't need to be read like a novel: A single chapter could be the basis of a very good professional development discussion session among teachers. Any college or university with an interest in adopting the newest technologies for their classrooms would

do well to circulate a copy of this book.

Technology and Higher Education, 1996-97 by Perry Robinson of the American Federation of Teachers might more properly be entitled, “Workstations Don't Get Tenure.”

This report discusses in broad terms how new technologies for classrooms and improved technologies for distance education are affecting university education now, and how they will probably affect it in the future.

If one makes the mistake of trying to do a quick read of this document, without a bit of time for pondering and reflection, one sees a very bleak future for higher education and its use of information technology. But a more thoughtful reading makes one realize that for every difficulty pointed out in the report there are possible remedies.

This report does a good job of looking at the cost of information technology—both the hardware and software for the computerized multimedia classes we hear so much about. The idea is put squarely on the table that the cost of information technology is high.

But that's not going to stop a number of universities from going ahead with such distance learning. Their reasons may vary—fear of being left behind, the thought that they'll be squeezed out by corporate America, or the desire for profit—but whatever the motive, they are definitely moving into distance learning.

This balanced report on technology should be read not only by faculty but by administrators at all levels of higher education—community colleges, colleges, and universities.

A central idea that runs through this report is that faculty unions need to wake up and take notice that information technology is here to stay and is part of a faculty member's life. The report doesn't harangue faculty unions for any specific failure, but it does point out that the development of new software and coursewares by faculty has not been given adequate thought in relation to faculty workload or the tenure process.

One weakness: the book doesn't present as much faculty thought on the matter as I would have liked. Some comments from untenured faculty at various institutions definitely would have added a dimension.

The book is about half appendices and pretty tough sledding, but it does contain important stuff. The appendices have been chosen with care and contain a spectrum of collective bargain agreement clauses from different universities about information technologies and distance learning.

Appendices B and C are extracts from documents issued by Western Illinois University and the North Central Association of Col-

leges and Schools respectively. These documents deal with how distance learning is to be used by faculty who may be implementing them for the first time.

Someone once said, "the devil is in the details," but in these cases a saving angel may be in these details as well for any faculty union that hasn't yet formulated distance learning policies.

This report is not light or easy reading. It probably won't end up on anyone's best seller list. Yet, it is useful and should generate a good deal of discussion. It makes amply clear that distance learning and a host of new technologies are here, whether faculty members make good use of them or not.

For those of us who still claim proudly to be computer illiterate it should give us pause. ■

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