

Whatever happened to the revolution?

Bruce Dixon

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Sometimes when I read articles about education revolutions, digital or otherwise, I find myself feeling a little tentative. You know, you want to believe it's all good, and everyone is embracing contemporary ideas that empower our young learners... but sadly, there is no Santa Claus and they are not all what you hope they might be.

Such was the stunning realisation I had from a very recent *New York Times* article, with the pithy headline, No Child Left Untabled*. Now the title has to provoke interest, credit to the sub-editor, but as you reach deeper into the piece by Carlo Rotella the warning signals come in loud and clear.

This is a story of one of Amplify's (www.amplify.com) latest conquests, in Greensboro, N.C., where more than 15,000 students now have tablets from Rupert Murdoch's latest adventure into education. The mastermind behind Amplify is Joel Klein, the former Chancellor of NY Schools.

But this is not an isolated example of what is emerging; sadly it is becoming a trend. The corporate sector has found the Education Treasure Chest, and it's called "ubiquitous access to technology for all students."

Now as hypocritical as this all might sound, coming from someone who has devoted a number of decades driving Seymour Papert's 1 to 1 vision, there is more to be told. You see, what is happening has very little, in fact in most cases, nothing, in common with that original vision. This is all about control, and, you guessed it, money.

This story, in the *Times*, does give some insight into where Murdoch and his associates want to take ubiquitous access. Sadly, that is not the most disappointing part of this explosion of corporate interest in 1 to 1, because the good folk at Apple, with their iPads, have seemingly opened a veritable 'Pandora's box of triviality' that is undermining much of the extraordinary work of the past 15 to 20 years. It didn't have to be this way; but they just couldn't resist the

temptation, so instead of developing a genuinely fully functional personal portable computer, they gave us a dumbed-down engagement device – and they've sold tens of millions – too many of them to students. Fortunately a number of their competitors have belatedly seen their error of Apple's ways and are showing more respect for young learners' needs with fully functional devices.

Maybe I'm just a purist, or maybe I am starting at the wrong end, but I thought we all agreed, many, many years ago this was meant to be first and foremost about learning. I thought we agreed the only place to start was with a clearly articulated vision of how kids learn, and then from that we could build out extraordinary possibilities for a child having 24/7 access to their own computer... to use as noted US writer Gary Stager says as "an intellectual laboratory and a vehicle for self-expression" ...or as Alan Kay expressed so many years ago "an instrument whose music is ideas."

I saw none of that in the shallow examples outlined in the *Times* article, nor in the many similar stories I have come across recently about the 'tabletisation' of learning.

Our priorities are not the priorities of companies like Amplify and others who are seeking to leverage the momentum to 1 to 1 for commercial gain; and if you think this is simply what is happening in the US, think again.

There's nothing wrong with profit, in fact in most cases it's a very good thing. But why can't companies that set their profit sights on education, and that are massively over endowed with funding and influence focus on the things that really matter ...like how kids learn; like effective pedagogy; like the possibilities of the future and not the traditional practices of the past?

You don't use technology to control kids, it's meant to be about liberating learners. That means new thinking about trust, new roles for new contexts, and new models for learning, for schooling and ...for doing business with schools.

This is not a time for 'oh, well, we tried' ... it's a time to standup and speak out. The Labor government's \$2 billion Digital Education 'Revolution' (sic) has come to an end, and we must learn from the feeble mindedness and political opportunism that drove that policy, and show serious leadership in shaping the next phase. We simply cannot afford to allow

our young people to become pawns of policy weakness, and so the real test of the Coalition government's intent around education will be how they respond to this vacuum.

Over the past decade, Australia has led the world in courageously seeking out the best ways in which technology can expand and extend opportunities for learning. It implicitly allows us to expect more; to expect a different, more relevant education for a very different world. We must continue to accept our young people are living and learning in a dramatically different context to the one we grew up in.

Over the past three years I had the good fortune to lead a small team at ideasLAB (www.ideaslab.edu.au) exploring the potential for new pedagogies to provide deeper learning opportunities for our modern learners. The quality of the work by my colleagues, Richard Olsen and Sofia Pardo was exceptional, and our findings broke new ground globally in how we better articulate what ubiquitous access can make possible for our young people. Fortunately that work will continue through Sofia's work with the Classroom of the Future project with the Victorian Department, supported by Intel and others, and Richard's ongoing research, workshops and soon to be released book.

We simply cannot afford to be distracted from our core task, by corporate opportunism

or government policy laziness. Australia sits at a place in time, where we can build on this work and break exciting new ground in what this technology access now makes possible. It is time to dispense with the research timidity we have seen for far too long from the education faculties of our major universities and commit to leading this field, rather than simply following what is too often research of the bleeding obvious.

It's the time for educational leaders across the country to take the lead in the public debate around education and the unprecedented opportunities technology offers our young learners, to ensure they reach the bold and ambitious heights we've aspired to for them for so long.

*link to article: <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/magazine/no-child-left-untabled.html?from=homepage> **ET**



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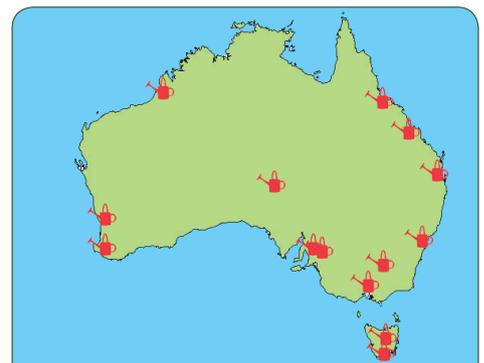
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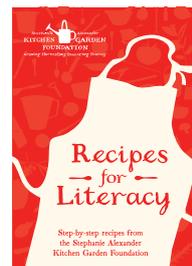
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