Teaching in a Digital Age, by A.W. (Tony) Bates


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The phrase “teaching in the digital age” conjures thoughts of resources and advice related to specific technologies such as learning management systems, cloud computing, communication tools, MOOCs, other educational technology tools, practices, and trends. Yet, Tony Bates has managed to capture these elements and so much more in his latest book, Teaching in the Digital Age. Each chapter addresses a specific topic, and these topics can be largely grouped into five overarching themes: (1) providing a foundation, (2) exploring teaching methods in different environments, (3) selecting media, (4) investigating modes and trends of delivery, and (5) ensuring instruction quality and providing instructor support. Bates also provides succinct “key takeaway” lists, activities to stimulate deeper thought, and scenarios to contextualize and evaluate content application. From an emphasis on making the content user-friendly to publishing the text as an open book available in a variety of formats, Bates promises to keep the content dynamic and updated through the BC Campus open textbook platform. The result is a

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guided journey through paradigm shifts, instructional practices, and trends that serves different purposes for different audiences.

Summary

Bates creates the foundation for the digital age journey by exploring what it means to be part of a knowledge-based society and how this shift impacts learning, especially at the post-secondary level. The questions and challenges facing college and university administrations today are increasingly rooted in scaling operations to meet an ever-shifting career landscape. In other words, many of the jobs that exist today did not exist 10 years ago, and the demand for higher education is only increasing. How do we provide access, maintain quality, and prepare students for unknown jobs when technology continuously advances, outcomes and expectations change, and enrollment numbers rise? What is the role of the modern university and (how) does this differ from the fundamental purpose of higher education? For the faculty member or graduate student reading the text, this section serves two purposes. First, it establishes why we should pay attention to administrative issues and how they impact our classrooms. Second, it provides a glimpse into the future, broadly defining relevant skills that cut across curricular areas and challenging instructors to consider how these skills apply to specific subjects. The administrator reading the text can use the same information to better inform future policy changes while being sensitive to the demands of the instructional faculty. Thus, while it may be tempting to skip the first chapter and directly access teaching implications, it would be a mistake to do so.

The second theme of Bates’ book encompasses three chapters and focuses on teaching implications within specific environments. At first glance, the organization of this section seems a bit unusual. Bates begins by continuing the knowledge-based society conversation and how this
paradigm shift informs general teaching practice, including a brief overview of learning theories and how instructional methods are well suited for particular types of knowledge. From here, though, Bates then divides the implications into “campus-focused,” “online focus,” and “massive, open, online courses (MOOCs).” This approach to organization might seem redundant or fractured if not for the classification of MOOCs as a disruptive innovation. The separate chapter on MOOCs could initiate an interesting dialogue at all levels of the academy regarding the future landscape of education, role of the instructor in an online learning environment, and value of open learning networks. However, singling out MOOCs in a separate chapter feels contrived. The section might better serve readers as an emphasis on disruptive innovations collectively rather than focusing specifically on MOOCs. Similarly, the misplaced subsections evaluating instructional design models that dominate the chapter about online teaching seems quite out of place. Perhaps the most valuable takeaway from this section is the notion that there is no one right way or method. This is why it is important to be familiar with the different learning theories and approaches to learning in different contexts to be better prepared instructors. For example, there is a place for lecturing in the digital age, but this method is less effective for developing certain types of knowledge or in specific environments, such as online. Bates also attempts to remind readers that technology should not determine the teaching method. While these messages are not new, they are nonetheless important and bear repeating.

The most problematic of the sections encompasses chapters six through eight and explores technology and media tools. Bates’ explanation of technology in education reads like a damaged cassette tape (see Fig. 6.5.1) that skips forward on play, highlighting random tools and advancements throughout history before moving on to the next technology. The explanations and overviews are suspended in time, as illustrated by the sometimes outdated selection of references
at the end of each subsection or the emphasis on computing as a technological tool in the midst of text, audio, video, and social media, none of which would viable in the digital age without computers. Even the guidance Bates provides with his SECTIONS model for selecting media is not without issue. The majority of the difficulties related to Bates’ media selection recommendations lie with failing to contextualize the decision-making. Experienced multimedia designers and online instructors may appreciate the mention and summary of Richard Mayer’s research on design principles, but this section is likely lost on anyone outside of that small group. Even then, the summary falls short of helping the reader consider how to apply the guidance. These issues aside, Bates’ descriptions of various media strengths and weaknesses lend themselves to potential applications in faculty development. As more institutions seek innovative and accessible solutions for supporting faculty, these lists could be transformed into interactive guides or quick references for choosing appropriate tools.

Instructors and administrators alike would do well to explore the chapters on modes of delivery and trends. Many of the scenarios that appear throughout the book and draw upon the change instructors often face take on a new perspective when considering the continuum of learning contexts (see Fig. 9.1.2) and trends that are shaping the media and resources used in these contexts. The student-centered focus and advice to consider multiple modes guide the reader from re-evaluating how certain technological tools play a different role in the digital age into recognizing the open phenomenon and how open education fits into the shifting landscape. The explanation of open education resources (OER) and creative commons licensing should lead to engaging and perhaps controversial debates on some campuses. OER as a movement within educational systems poses a disruptive innovation that is already impacting publishers and represents the constructive nature of knowledge building in the digital age. It follows then that
consideration of OER and open principles should be at the forefront of many discussions regarding instructional methods and materials.

The final two chapters address quality and support, which are inherently of interest to and important for administrators. Bates notes very carefully that existing quality measures often fail to consider the affective side of learning and are rooted in expectations that are no longer relevant. Bates’ discussion does suggest a framework for ensuring quality during course design but does not provide an appropriately aligned evaluation method. This oversight contradicts the systematic approaches described earlier in the book and somewhat detracts from the section, but may simply reflect the current debate on quality assurance and measurement in the larger educational community. With respect to instructional support, the most crucial statement Bates makes is in the form of a takeaway regarding institutional empowerment and barriers. Educational technologists and researchers know the dire importance of providing professional development and technical support. Unfortunately, this priority is all too often overlooked by administrations. Administrator and staff support is key to helping universities and instructors adapt to teaching in a digital age, but the instructional ecosystem must be inclusive of all roles. To close out the book, Bates leaves us with the following quote, “…in the end the responsibility and to some extent the power to change lies within teachers and instructors themselves” (p. 436). Building knowledge and constructing learning, regardless of role, will only continue to evolve, and Bates’ book has the potential to evolve with us.

Disclaimers & Assumptions

Like Bates, I believe in the value and future of open publishing. Some readers may be skeptical of the model or hesitant to adopt a text that may undergo constant revisions. Personally, I see this dynamic approach as a modeling technique that illustrates how quickly information is
generated, curated, and disseminated in the digital age. Unfortunately, this approach is not without issues. For example, Bates’ scenarios to help readers scrutinize the information and explore personal relevance appear incomplete. The handy About the Book section mentions that there are 10 such scenarios, but I only came across nine. Scenario I appears to be missing with Scenario H appearing in Chapter 10 and Scenario J in Chapter 12 (note: Scenario B is in Appendix 1 rather than appearing in chronological order within the main text). It would not be surprising to see the book updated within the coming months to correct this omission. Nevertheless, by no means should we assume that an update is guaranteed within a specific timeframe (or ever).

The general summary presented herein identifies a number of strengths and weaknesses with Teaching in a Digital Age. However, for as useful as the text might be, there are other questionable elements that should be mentioned. First, some audiences may disagree with the shift between formal and informal language throughout the scenarios and chapters. Related, message design and visual literacy proponents will find the image selection strategy to support content troublesome or at the very least good non-examples for classroom discussion. For example, the figure 5.3 caption references the various types of MOOCs. Yet, the actual image is of nine different breeds of dairy cattle. Similarly, figure 11.10.6 illustrates a threaded discussion and depicts an example from 2001 in a browser that has not been widely used in 10 years. Surely something more current and relevant could have been used. There are many similar examples of figures that serve as little more than a distraction from the text. Perhaps more debatable is copyright misattribution in a few instances (see figure 11.12 for an example). In a text that promotes open resources and creative commons licensing, it is inexcusable to attribute copyright
to Wikipedia, an entity that specifically states that it holds no copyright claims over text and images.

Overall, the book does have significant value to a variety of audiences. Specifically, faculty serving as change agents within an organization might use portions to help inform policy decisions and strategic planning. Administrators evaluating current methods and implementing new plans will find genuine guidance to initiate conversations and explore related resources. Teaching faculty and graduate students looking to develop strategies and methods related to technology integration or move into online teaching will gain a foundation upon which to build experience. The end result is that Bates’ ambitious effort to help the academy adjust to teaching and learning in a digital age is just a small step in a larger journey.

**Author Bio:** Tonia A. Dousay, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of instructional technology at the University of Wyoming with 15 years of instructional design and project management experience. Her teaching and research focus on design-based learning activities and the knowledge and skills acquired and reinforced through these opportunities, both in face-to-face and online classrooms. Dr. Dousay received the 2014 Mary Garland Early Career Fellowship Award from the University of Wyoming, 2013 AECT-MPD Immersive Learning Award, and 2013 AECT-IAP Distance Education Best Practices Award. She is an active member of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology and can be contacted at tdousay@uwyo.edu or on Twitter at @tadousay.