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Review of Savin-Baden M. (2015). *Rethinking Learning in an Age of Digital Fluency: Is being digitally tethered a new learning nexus?* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. 168 Pp. ISBN: 9780415738187

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Abstract

Being connected through online and digital technologies has become increasingly commonplace over the past 20 years, but our understanding of the effect this has on where and how people learn has tended to be patchy at best. In *Rethinking Learning in an Age of Digital Fluency: Is being digitally tethered a new learning nexus?* Maggi Savin-Baden examines the impact of increasing digital connectedness and how this connectivity might affect the culture of learning now, and in the future. I welcome this book as a fascinating and thought-provoking discussion that pulls together a wide range of research and experiences, and does not avoid controversy where it is found.

Keywords Digital learning · Digital tethering · Education research

The sub-title of the book 'Is being digitally tethered a new learning nexus?' may be both fascinating and problematic for some readers, who will be pondering what is meant by the term 'digitally tethered'. Maggi Savin-Baden defines it as '… the constant interaction and engagement with digital technology; the sense of being always on, always engaged…' (p. 11). In the introduction, she also explains the underlying motive for writing the book (one with which I feel a significant sympathy) as being a sense of irritation from the generally negative reporting on young peoples' interaction with social media. She describes this viewpoint as '…pontificating based on relatively little evidence…' (p. 1) and, although research has continued to investigate this area since the publication of the book, much of that research still appears to be an attempt to highlight the negative effects of social media on young people. These effects are often described by using terms such as addiction, which has a strong connotation with drugs and alcohol, to describe what might be better labelled as compulsive use (Oberst et al. 2017; Blackwell et al. 2017).

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From the start, Savin-Baden lays out the arguments eloquently and clearly that there is little research that helps us to understand the impact of being continuously connected through the use of technology, that many of the arguments currently presented tend to be negative about the effects of that connection and that there is little understanding of both the current usage of social media technologies and the affordances they may have for learning. She leads us through an exploration of the different types of digital tethering, making a distinction between being tethered to the technology itself, or being tethered to other people through the medium of technology. The emphases in these two cases are different, but they can also be amalgamated into a third type, where users are tethered to both and use technology to explore different manifestations of themselves to a range of audiences, many of whom they do not know personally. However, we need to be careful that we do not assume that all young people are digitally tethered. Some are strongly tethered, some are not tethered at all, and amongst those who are tethered there is no reliable way to estimate the length of the 'rope'. Savin-Baden recognises this, but it is likely that many teachers and academic faculty do not. For example, Tattersall (2016), in his review of Mark Carrigan's (2016) book *Social Media for Academics*, makes the point that the majority of academics have had little or no interaction with what social media has to offer, for a variety of reasons. He argues that attempts to engage academics with anything above a minor interest in social media have at times felt like '…applying a big hammer to a very small, nervous nut'. By examining how the use of social media and communication technologies might impact on how students learn now, and in the future, this book makes an important contribution to cracking that nut.

There is a strong theoretical base to the arguments in the book, and some thought-provoking discussion about the use of the word pedagogy in education—especially in universities. Savin-Baden makes a good argument that the term tends to be used to describe the processes of teaching, which has led to the true meaning of pedagogy as the art and science of education being confused with teaching methods. This focus on subjects and disciplines, on curricula and systems, and on the commoditisation of learning, has resulted in universities moving away from their role as places of learning and exploration towards learning factories (my term) that use learning technologies to deliver learning materials to large audiences. The book winds its way through a rich and diverse landscape of argument and theory in defence of this position, challenging many accepted practices as it goes. As such, it is hard to do justice to the complexity of the arguments in a short review, but overall, the argument is that digital tethering could lead to greater openness, fluidity and flow in learning, which would enable students to bring their own individual characteristics into sharper focus in their own learning.

The book makes this argument by considering how the landscape of learning is changing due to digital technologies and how that landscape is constantly shifting, a characteristic Savin-Baden refers to as 'liquid' (p. 12). She goes on to discuss how students are now more physically mobile and are increasingly expecting to learn on the move, and how digital fluency is moving on from the more restricted notion of digital literacy towards social participation and cultural interchange. Whilst the breadth of discussion is a clear strength of the book, it also presents one of its challenges: the sheer number of different strands of argument and thought can be difficult for the reader to weave together into a coherent argument at some points. But, Savin-Baden is a skilled writer, who steps in from time to time to help us to reorient ourselves and move on, without becoming bogged down in the complexity of a multi-stranded argument.

Whilst the book makes a thought-provoking and well-argued case, it also contains a contradiction that risks undermining its own argument. It is ultimately debateable whether

the case for the appropriateness of the phrase 'digital tethering' (as opposed to, say, digital connectedness) is convincingly made. The argument sometimes risks conflating the constant carrying and connectedness to mobile devices themselves—the physical 'tether'—with the things to which those devices connect users. The dictionary definition of tethering is fundamentally about restricting movement, rather than being constantly connected to something. Take, for example, the Concise OED definition: '*n.*, rope, chain, halter, by which a grazing animal is confined; *vt.*, tie with (a) tether…' (Concise OED 2011). It appears that the book both presents digital tethering as an appropriate phrase to describe the 'always on' nature of some peoples' connection to social media, whilst at the same time presenting arguments for why the notion of restriction and loss of freedom that many commentators assign to (especially young) peoples' use of digital technologies is misplaced. For example, in the chapter on digital identities, Savin-Baden argues that the idea of identity has been changed due to our interactions with digital technologies, and with each other through these media. She argues that '…what is needed is … not a static view of self but a liquid view, a sense of multiple identities that shift and change with time' (p. 104). The reader is left wondering how tethering can enable shifting and changing.

I would argue that tethering is, if not actually a pejorative term, at least a term that implies confinement and restriction rather than freedom, which in turn leads to paradoxes in the book. This becomes especially apparent in the chapter about learning on the move. It is hard to see how either physical or cognitive freedom of movement is restricted by even extensive use of mobile devices and social media; indeed, the examples in the book demonstrate how freedom of access to knowledge, and to collaboration with fellow learners, can be greatly enhanced by being connected to sources of information and to fellow learners. The penultimate sentence in the book is '(Students) will not be bounded nor stay still' (p. 139), a statement that can be difficult to equate with the notion of being tethered to anything.

This book is well worth a read: it at once challenges, confounds, troubles, contradicts, informs and enlightens. I found myself arguing with it directly, agreeing with it wholeheartedly and stopping for protracted periods to stare at the wall as a completely new way of looking at something stimulated a storm of synthesis. It is not a book of answers, but rather one that generates questions and discussions, and encourages the conversations that are vital for learning development now, and in the future.

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