

Book Review: The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University by Elizabeth Losh

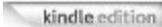
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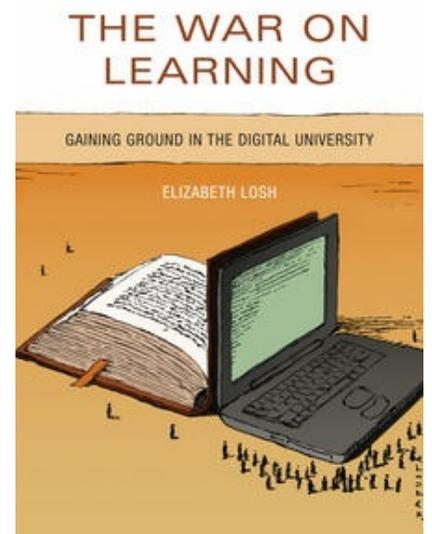
In *The War on Learning*, Elizabeth Losh analyses recent trends in post-secondary education and the rhetoric around them. In an effort to identify educational technologies that might actually work, she looks at strategies including MOOCs, the gamification of subject matter, remix pedagogy, video lectures, and educational virtual worlds. Losh's work is valuable reading for students and parents trying to make sense of when current technologies provide venues for meaningful assignments and assessments, rather than serving as 'add ons' to conventional education that leave everyone feeling cheated, writes Susan Marie Martin.



The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University. Elizabeth Losh. MIT Press. June 2014.

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Education at all levels throughout the developed world is dominated — and, oftentimes, daunted — by the inclusion of '21st century skills' across curricula, a term typically given to ICT and productivity skills. When I taught in secondary schools in Canada, the pull-down comments provided by the government on report cards asked teachers to rank students on their use of software programmes and time management. Sadly, students in primary school were also subjected to the same standards: through the wonders of neoliberal educational reforms, what was once the domain of workplace training was now part of a child's life from the age of six. A colleague and I wondered how a parent-teacher conference with William Blake's parents would have passed with '19th century skills' on his horizon: would a particular quill help their son become a demand-driven poet? The analogy helped us articulate what 'reforms' had accomplished: skills and attitudes from 'corporate Canada' had been downloaded into publicly-funded classrooms, preventive measures for an alleged 'skills deficit' that threatened Canada's economy.



The appropriation of public spaces and learning by private interests — blanketed in the promise of facilitating learning — prompted an additional question: when and how does the inclusion of technology in education work in the self-interests of students rather than in the interests of the economy? It is in the service of this noble goal that Elizabeth Losh has methodically and contemplatively compiled *The War on Learning*. The title encapsulates the situation plaguing those in the trenches — teachers, students, administrators, and parents — whether they take positions as technophiles, technophytes, or technophobes. Losh positions herself as a conscientious objector, and claims ground that neither champions "the reactionary past" nor "the radical future" (p.26), focusing instead on examining the present to address "small negotiations rather than grand visions" (p.14).

Losh effectively moves beyond the headlines and bestsellers that warn of literacy and attention crises among device-devoted youth, and those that dismiss the academy as a hopeless anachronism, to painstakingly deconstruct the "rhetoric of crisis". Chapter two wades through the minutia of the problems and solutions posed, giving readers a summary and evaluation of a lengthy list of perspectives. Readers may be quick to label Losh's detailed examination as plodding, or hope she will take a political corner, but to do either is to underestimate her commitment to genuinely make sense of the present; she extends an invitation to the reader to join the conversations and draw conclusions throughout the text. For all involved in the war on learning — even observers

— two critical points made by Losh serve as provisos for understanding media “pronouncements” about the “trends for the future of education”: firstly, the experimental nature of these projects means that “failure is a distinct possibility”; and, secondly, “understanding precedents is important” (p.127).



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She takes pains to address whose interests are served by which arguments, demonstrating how the neoliberal bottom-line — whether grounded in finances, productivity, or security — rarely works in the interests of students. This chapter concludes with the question: Who speaks for students? Here the author departs from the battle over curricula and gadgetry to address laptop bans in the lecture hall, and “digital busywork” that prioritises “time on task” at the expense of other classroom extensions that foster learning (pp.72-75). Later in the book she explores how technology is used meaningfully when students create assignments for real-world audiences, including “Wikistorms” that document “the cultural contributions of underrepresented groups” on Wikipedia (p.232).

The concern for students and an education that works in their interests continues as Losh addresses the many frontiers on which the ‘war on learning’ is fought. Particularly insightful is her exploration of the current ‘next best thing’ in the chapter devoted to “The Rhetoric of the Open Courseware Movement”. Again, she deconstructs the hype and complexities yet, at its core, her approach is simple: she interrogates the use of the word ‘open’ as used by those who insist that MOOCs bring post-secondary offerings to the masses. To this end she questions the demographics of the ‘open’ student body: billed by its promoters as both an alternative to traditional education and a segue to post-secondary education for the disadvantaged, yet in one ‘open’ courseware platform over 80% of the students enrolled held undergraduate degrees (p.122). The word ‘open’ is also problematised by critics because of the neoliberal nature of MOOCs: “Silicon valley values” are typically promoted (p.123), along with the use of commercial courseware and a dramatic increase in the ratio of students per lecturer. However, she doesn’t simply leave the reader with a problem: a solution that makes ‘massive online’ truly open is detailed.

The book’s subtitle is *Gaining Ground in the Digital University*, and the reader is shown how this is happening in the final chapter. Throughout the book Losh provides alternatives and solutions where current technological offerings fail; these are pulled from her experiences as both an academic and a student. In this chapter she provides six principles that serve to “guide” both “effective pedagogy and decision making”, solidifying earlier insights to demonstrate how these goals are attained in a “digital university” that is more “inclusive, generative, just, and constructive” (p.224). The sixth and final principle is particularly telling: the novelty should wear off before a new instructional technology is embraced (p.236).

Key to the success of both this chapter and the book is that Losh has not forgotten what it is to be a student. This makes *The War on Learning* an invaluable ‘tool kit’ for administrators and those at the front of a lecture hall. However, ground must also be gained in the digital university by students. These six principles make Losh’s work valuable reading for students and parents trying to make sense of when current technologies provide venues for

meaningful assignments and assessments rather than serving as 'add ons' to conventional education that leave everyone feeling cheated.

Susan Marie Martin holds a PhD in Applied Social Studies (Interdisciplinary) from University College Cork (National University of Ireland). Her research focuses on the impact of modernity and gentrification on the urban poor, particularly women who eke out subsistence earnings as street traders. She is an international educator, currently dividing her time between Ireland and the Middle East. Her thoughts on tangible and abstract markets, and the urban poor may be followed on Twitter [@smariem13](#). [Read more reviews by Susan](#).

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