Laptops and Literacy: Learning in the Wireless Classroom

Mark Warschauer. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006, pp. 178.
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Mark Warschauer's *Laptops and Literacy: Learning in the Wireless Classroom* has eight chapters that build upon one another to show how the incorporation of technology, specifically laptops, could work to increase literacy rates. Warschauer looks at ten schools in Maine and California to show how laptops help improve literacy in the classroom. He wrote his book based on the action research he conducted at these schools over a two year period. The schools that he has chosen for his study vary with the students' socio-economic statuses (SES), their location, and the ethnic make-up of each school. Warschauer shows that the success of a one-to-one laptop program depends on the SES of the students and location of the school. He shows that students who were "primed since an early age to prepare for college" are more successful in one-to-one laptop programs, while students from low SES neighbourhoods are less inclined to have the "strong research focus" and critical and analytic skills that are needed for this kind of program (Warschauer, 2006). Warschauer presents very persuasive arguments to show that one-to-one laptop programs increase literacy rates. He includes many anecdotes from teachers, students, and administrators that mainly report on their positive experiences with laptops and their use in the classroom. At the end of each chapter he provides a brief summary of what he has discussed which helps the reader get a clear overview of the many topics he addresses.

Warschauer opens *Laptops and Literacy* by commenting on what he calls a current "literacy crisis" as he shows how technology has caused us to have multiple literacies. He focuses on academic literacies and digital literacies and emphasizes throughout his book that "the societal tools of literacy have also changed radically in the last 50 years, as reading writing, and research move rapidly from the page to the screen" (Warschauer, 2006). Reading on the internet is different than reading a book and Warschauer shows that technology could be used to promote reading and writing simply because of this current page to screen shift (Warschauer, 2006). Warschauer's book is really good for explaining how technology could be implemented into the classroom. However, at some points in his book I felt as though he was providing a sales pitch where he really was trying too hard to sell his idea. It made me stop to wonder: Can laptops really do that much? He is writing from a pro-technology perspective with the intention of selling his idea to future educators and fighting with a system that he says hasn't changed in the last 100 years (Warschauer, 2006).

Warschauer identifies three main literacy challenges that could be alleviated with laptop computer programs: "past and future," "home and school," and "rich and poor." For past and future he questions how schools will function in the twenty-first century and how much the curriculum reflects the changes and new skills that have been developed. He also sees laptops as a potential solution to the home and school divide as students can take their laptop home and can easily share what they have done at school. Finally, he shows how the gap between the

rich and poor can be somewhat alleviated as the access to technology can be provided for students who cannot afford to have computers at home.

Warschauer uses the term “Millennials” to refer to students who were born as “native” users of digital technologies (Warschauer, 2006). This term is very interesting and it really made me realize how much has changed and how “Millennials” see, read, and interact very differently in society because of their access to virtual notebooks. For this reason Warschauer’s argument is very timely and his call to action for change in the curriculum to address these challenges is important. However, the solution of having one-to-one laptop schools may not be the perfect route. There are many challenges that this option poses itself. Technologies change so rapidly and are so costly that it may not be very beneficial for students or the schools that fund the programs in the long run. Furthermore, students can easily become dependent on these mechanisms for research and knowledge that they don’t really take time to digest the material themselves.

Warschauer presents a really interesting comparison between two schools that were both in Maine where he showed that without the proper implementation and teacher training a laptop program could be unsuccessful. Howard Middle School is located in a “high-income suburban community in southern Maine” while Plum High School is located “in one of the most sparsely populated rural counties” where the annual household income is \$28,000 which is significantly below the state average (Warschauer, 2006). Not surprisingly, Howard has a thriving laptop program where the “technology-enhanced research goes far beyond finding and critically evaluating online information” (Warschauer, 2006). Plum, on the other hand, had students who gave presentations facing the screen rather than their audience and had just cut and pasted material from the internet that they read aloud (Warschauer, 2006). Warschauer says that the reason for this dramatic difference is because of Plum’s location and depressed economy and because Howard has high expectations coming from the parents who are largely professionals (Warschauer, 2006). The results of this study are plausible, yet it still does not provide conclusive evidence on whether the success of a laptop program depends on how rich the neighbourhood is. Furthermore, through Warschauer’s analysis of these two schools that were both located in the same state I was able to see that he himself realizes that technology cannot be the entire answer to the “literacy crisis.” He admits that “it takes more than computers and Internet access to connect students to real learning opportunities” (Warschauer, 2006).

Warschauer’s book is great for educators who want to learn how to incorporate more technology into the classroom and what techniques and tools will work to enhance learning. It is evident that multiple literacies have evolved because of new technologies that have made blogging, podcasting, creating webpages, and digital videos a significant part of the new “Millennials” lives and these technologies cannot be ignored. New learning styles and perhaps even disabilities are bound to be formed from the inclusion of new technologies. Warschauer’s study has shown that one-to-one laptop programs have the potential to increase literacy rates. However, the amount of access to technology depends on the teacher, the students’ SES, and the willingness of the school. While some schools have essentially “pulled the plug” on technology, others

have moved ahead with its inclusion. It is only time that will tell whether one-to-one laptops will be just as much a part of schools as the TV and VCR systems are today.

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