

Moe, Terry M. and Chubb, John E. (2009) *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of Education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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Almost twenty years after their *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, Chubb and Moe present their reprise. In their earlier work, they argued that messy democratic governance was ruining the schools. The salvation would be in freeing schools from governmental control and treating education as a market commodity. This analysis, although criticized as deeply flawed, was hailed as an intellectual foundation for the school choice movement. The authors echo their earlier theme.

Since their first book, Terry Moe moved to the Hoover Institution and John Chubb is a founding partner of *EdisonLearning*, the nation's largest private educational management organization. In writing this book, they pay inspirational homage to the Koret Task Force at Hoover which includes Eric Hanushek, Caroline Hoxby, E. D. Hirsch, Checker Finn, Herbert Walberg, Paul Peterson and others whose work is characterized by its advocacy for school privatization.

About the Authors

Terry M. Moe is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the William Bennett Munro Professor of political science at Stanford University.

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The book is a polemic and the authors are not reticent in naming those they see on the other pole. The theme of the book is that school reform has been thwarted by political forces but the pervasive expansion of technology will overwhelm the current structure of education. This will result in the types of privatization and school choice the authors have long advanced. Throughout the book, the authors claim that the public schools are failing and use phrases such as “no one disagrees with this assessment.” (p. 6)



Terry M. Moe

The first of the six chapters asserts that a cabal of powerful resisters is battling to prevent technology from transforming the schools. The second chapter, titled “The need for achievement,” cherry picks particular NAEP items and PISA results to demonstrate the failings of American education and laments how the schools are “lagging the world.” A pivotal economic argument is expressed when the authors say, “it matters enormously how well nations do on achievement tests” (p. 25). No recognition is given to facts incompatible with their assertion such as the continuous rise of NAEP scores for majority and minority students over the last thirty years (Nation’s Report Card, 2009) or to a balanced examination of the factors that do matter in international global competitiveness (World Economic Forum, 2009).



John E. Chubb

The third chapter is dedicated to the “politics of blocking” which the authors contend is engineered by “powerful groups” such as the NEA, AFT, Democrats, the NAACP, ACLU and People for the American Way. Without presenting data supporting their assertions, the authors claim that everybody knows we have a problem, these groups are thwarting reform and that accountability as a solution has “obvious merit.”

The fourth chapter is a paean to cyber charter schools and a lengthy description of a Midland, PA operation is presented. Another long testimonial is provided on the Dayton Academy. The use of cyber-tutors in India receives positive recognition as being inexpensive and expedient. Although, in chapter two, test scores are the measure of public school failures, the Dayton school test scores are only vaguely noted as “generally improved” in reading and math scores are described simply as “up in some grades, down in others.” (p. 86). Formative assessments get a positive mention but no data is provided showing the efficacy of these measures.

The fifth chapter opens with an attack on government with the claim that public schools will not innovate in technology because vested interests thwart these efforts. Not mentioned is the research showing that the failure of charter schools to outscore public schools has been attributed to the lack of innovation in charter schools. (Lubienski, 2008; Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, and Rothstein, 2006)

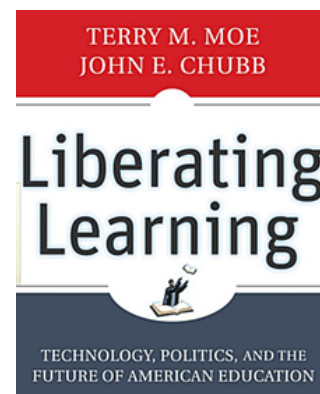
The major theme (and title) of this chapter is “The Resistance” is thwarting cyber growth. Districts and unions are presented as the major obstructers although schools are embracing technology according to the authors. In apparent contradiction, the authors say cyber charters “have been growing at a fast clip.” (p. 122) Notably absent is any measure of the quality of these cyber schools. The attack on the enemies of technology is buttressed by charts on teacher union membership as compared with teacher identifiers on student data systems. This association is interpreted as causality. The chapter is closed by the claim that technological implementations “are subject to a political minefield” but that no one can really stop them.

In the concluding chapter, the claim is repeated that public schools are not meeting the needs of the 21st century, and the authors come to the less than startling conclusion that education is controlled by politics. In Moe and Chubb’s opinion, the teacher unions wield hegemonic power. As no evidence is presented to buttress the claim, it remains merely an opinion.

The authors conclude that technology comes from outside the political system and will be “transformative.” They offer their utopian view which is a land of cyber charter schools where staff is reduced and each person can have his or her own curriculum.

The book is written in a light style emphasizing stories, testimonials and anecdotes at some length. It is directed at a non-technical audience and is unencumbered by any systemic and balanced presentation of evidence and facts. Copious notes and an index are provided; but the references are focused on explanations, asides, newspaper articles, and interviews. Thus, it attempts to create an image of an academically or scientifically acceptable work, but the contents fall well short. It is a polemic which will be found useful for those embracing the authors’ particular ideology.

Perhaps the greatest deficiency of the effort is its muddled and confused overall logic. The authors concoct a scenario that says a cabal of obstructionists is blocking



technology and then readily admit that schools are incorporating technology at great speed. They argue that districts oppose technology even though it is the district that supplies the technology to the schools.

While arguing the inevitability of technology and how it will lead to their vision is the main theme, the rant about teachers unions and international competitiveness is irrelevant to their thesis. Further, the presentation on test scores and international competitiveness doesn't withstand serious scrutiny. The combination of obstructionists, international competitiveness, politics, and the inexorable rise of technology just does not come together as a coherent thematic argument.

The authors' assertion that technology will be transformative would likely be embraced by a broad audience (p. 151). But that the transformation will be their particular vision of the future is to engage in doubtful divination. The theme of the 1939 New York World's Fair was predicting the future: they featured the latest advances in steam locomotives.

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About the Reviewer

William J. Mathis is the Managing Director of the Education and the Public Interest Center, University of Colorado, Boulder. Previously, he was Superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, Brandon, VT. He was a National Superintendent of the Year finalist in 2003 and was the Vermont Superintendent of the Year for 2002. He served on the Board of Directors of the American Education Finance Association and was President of the Vermont Superintendents' Association and Chair of the Vermont Education Coalition. He is also a consultant to various states and groups around the nation. Bill has published or presented over 150 national research papers, policy briefs, newspaper columns and monographs on finance, assessment, school vouchers, cost-effectiveness, education reform, history, special education and Constitutional issues. With a background in assessment, he consulted for the National Assessment of Educational Progress and numerous states in the design of their large-scale testing programs. Currently, he teaches school finance at the University of Vermont. In previous positions, he has served as Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education and as a guidance counselor and a school psychologist.



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