

Avoiding Post-COVID EdTech Failure

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Think back to all those brilliantly publicized great EdTech ideas of the past that have miserably failed. It's quite possible you've lived through one, two, or more. I've been in the education and tech business for about 30 years, and have seen everything—from lavish laptop programs to superior software concepts launch with fanfare only to end up being scrapped. They were written about in our most popular magazines and showcased at the education trade shows, but they didn't last more than a few years.

Why?

As a student of EdTech history, I believe I know. It's part of the reason for writing My Secret #EdTech Diary. Many of those well-meaning, inventively inspiring EdTech solutions—most of which were based on a device, or specific software—vanished because there was little forethought. There was inadequate thought given to training, professional development, maintenance, upkeep, upgrades, support, setting expectations, and then securing the funds needed to sustain them.

Historical perspective about EdTech launches that failed

These historic EdTech launches were initially expensive not only to develop but to be deployed, used, and ultimately dropped. Think about the cost of a district laptop initiative. The cost is staggering, but it needs more than just money.

Historically, laptop deployment plans were very political, too. They had to be sold to more than just directors of technology; they needed to be endorsed by entire communities, which ultimately funded them. Looking back, it's easy to see that the plans would never endure through breakdowns, leadership changes, curriculum transformations, and lack of use. EdTech like this was doomed from the beginning, because it couldn't be sustained beyond the purchase of shiny devices.

So, why look back?

Looking back at our mistakes is vital. It is also simple to do and can help us to avoid future failures. Especially now, post COVID, when we have the opportunity to be educationally innovative, and more relevant and intentional with our products. If we've learned anything by looking back, it is that we were unprepared for a situation like the pandemic.

I'd like to say again, we have so much technology available to us and yet for many we were unprepared. How did that happen? There's a spotlight on education and technology right now and an opportunity to rethink and reshape how we utilize EdTech and how it can best underpin amazing teaching and learning. The positive outlook for EdTech companies is that they can help provide the change needed, and to do it for more than a few most economically fortunate, but rather for everyone around the globe. That will require more than simple, shiny-device thinking. We need to use what we've learned from the distant as well as the recent past.

Together we tried

Think of all we've gone through, together. Although we talked about and experimented with online learning before COVID, we were all scrambling to make it happen, almost overnight, on an enormous scale. Should we have tried to make online instruction just like the classroom, or should it have been different? Think about the wonderful projects and experiments teachers tried on their own. Most weren't prepared for the time or technology demands, and neither were their students or their parents.

However, when the technology was working, teachers who kept at it had success and often amazing successes. We discovered that students will learn if they get into their online classes. Our lesson is how to prevent the colossal failure of so many students who could not get there because of a lack of equipment and internet access.

An optimistic future

This is an exciting time for us all to take what we've learned and do what others have failed to do. I'm completely optimistic about this and the future of EdTech to help get this right. This very moment is the time when education, technology, and government, along with the EdTech vendors who provide solutions to come together for the greater good and for our children. It takes more than money, a great organization, or a celebrity presentation at an EdTech conference.

We need more than wonder

Whilst I can't see the future, I know there has to be a plan that goes beyond the initial wonder of tech to the practical and sustainable use over the long haul. If we remember what it was like before, take the good from our Zoom and Microsoft Teams COVID experiences, and use what worked, I believe there is a way to create something new and educationally solid.

Let me make this clear, no one must be left out, and it will require more than a conversation or connection leading from education to the workplace and career or college paths. That part is long overdue. This plan needs a complete rethinking what we teach as much as how we teach it. I go into this further in my book, My Secret #EdTech Diary, as well as more specifically what works and what doesn't. We need to keep the dialog going but then, very soon, be intentional in our steps going forward.

