

## Two 30 Year Veterans Discuss The Education Technology Market



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# TWO 30 YEAR VETERANS DISCUSS THE EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY MARKET

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Education technology is not new. We may think it is because the technology part confuses our senses of fluidity and speed. That's why in edtech, as with most things, perspective and context are priceless as they help illuminate where we are and maybe remove some of the shadows around where the market and thinking are likely to go.

Pam Nelson and Al Kingsley have been in and around edtech for more than thirty years. Not collectively, each. In edtech, that's basically forever. They've been investors, advisors, administrators, entrepreneurs in for-profits and non-profits, and in and out of C-suites. Kingsley, the current CEO of NetSupport is in the U.K., and a member of Forbes Technology Council. Nelson, in the U.S., now runs her own K12 education investment and advisory shop.

I asked each of them what things have surprised them most across their tenures in education technology. Surprisingly, they both said kind of the same thing.

"In key markets around the world, the sense of Groundhog Day," said Kingsley.

"The extremely slow speed of change over 30 years," said Nelson.

Kind of the same thing. Although they maybe mean it differently.

Kingsley elaborated that his déjà vu view included, "the promise of big projects to unleash the use of technology in schools only to be short-lived, poor professional development or insufficient funding to really embed and maximize its potential and then a cycle back to a focus on acquisition of knowledge over skills. This cycle seems to repeat itself," he said.

"It also surprises me how many startup edtech companies over the last 20 years have come and gone because they haven't seen the importance and relevance of co-production with educators," Kingsley said. "Vendors try and create a need that doesn't always exist," he said.

Nelson said, "I was surprised by the resistance and very slow acceptance by some of the larger education publishers to acknowledge, invest in, plan for edtech as a viable education market."

She said, as a result, publishers lost their advantage and suffered. "Many districts have also been very slow to embrace edtech, albeit faced with a host of issues that include bandwidth, training, devices, pedagogy and so on," she said.

Like Kingsley, Nelson had words for edtech companies, though she's more optimistic. "I've watched the leadership of edtech companies change drastically from being driven by upwardly mobile sales managers to a new generation of very smart, well-educated leaders with much more focus on business, culture, innovation," she said.

I asked them to name something they see coming in edtech that most people cannot or do not see yet.

"Forty years ago, an industry leader predicted that instruction or learning would eventually be metered by time usage. We are starting to see some examples of that particularly as more content is delivered from the cloud," Nelson said. "Augmented Reality, virtual reality and mixed media has the potential to greatly impact student learning, for example, transporting students back in time or to places around the world to experience history, or to do an experiment in a lab," she said.

"The availability of AI to help support personalized learning and retrieval practice tailored for a student's learning journey," was coming, Kingsley said. "I think skepticism has held back a willingness to investigate and embrace tools that not only benefit children but all also can have a significant impact on teacher workload," he said.

When asked about edtech's biggest challenge over the next decade, Kingsley said that challenge was, "Probably the concept of 10 years in that most strategic planning for education and within edtech is done on investment, with an outcome within a political cycle. Education takes 15 years for a child to reap the benefits so we need longer term strategies instead of quick wins."

To Nelson, the challenge she sees for edtech is that, "it's like the wild west of edtech solutions. The edtech market has yet to consolidate into more cohesive, interoperable solutions. There is little driving the overall selection of instructional

materials." Further, she asked, "What role should Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple play in K20 ed tech and what are they missing?"

Concluding, Kingsley said, "this all highlights that now more than ever the need for schools and districts to pause and ensure they have robust digital strategies that allow schools to move from quick wins to getting the benefit out of their edtech for the long term."

Nelson offered specific advice for edtech developers. "Iterate, iterate, iterate," she said, "take stock in what worked, what didn't and collaborate more widely.

"What's encouraging is the exponential increase over the last several years in the private investment of capital earmarked for early and late-stage development. Capital has been attracted to innovation and soon those who succeeded will be cherry picked by emerging leaders who will be in acquisition phase to help solve the interoperability issues," Nelson said.

They're the experts, but that all feels right. EdTech's success timelines are too short, the sustainability of solutions has been weak and interoperability remains a thorn. Moreover, they're both right, we have seen this before. The open question is how many more time we'll see it and if we'll ever see anything else.

### Comments from Al Kingsley and Pam Nelson.

