Forum

Reflections on CIES Provocations: The Double-Edged Sword

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The Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) special interest group at the 2025 Comparative and International Education Society led a provocation in Chicago focused on the pros and cons of technology in international development. The provocation was titled "Double-Edged Sword: How Digital Technology Is Reshaping and Transforming Modern Society." This team approached the provocation by providing a set of three questions that the audience could address. What follows is a dialogue from each of the facilitators.

Jeff: I led the first provocation focused on technology and change in local cultures. In the first provocation, I focused on the topic of technology's role in shifting and changing local culture. I shared about a local tradition in Nepal of meeting spaces in villages called *chautaras*. A chautara is a banyan tree with a large sitting space under the tree where villagers gather to socialize, typically after working in the fields. It is a vibrant and exciting space and is often the social hub of the village. After the introduction of mobile phones, attending chautaras is less frequent, and in fact, some are nearly empty. I challenged the participants to discuss whether technological influences, such as the example of the mobile phone, impact whether chautara attendance is good or bad. Participants were able to engage and, through provocative conversations, were able to explain both the pros and cons. In the end, many were able to acknowledge the benefits of technology and were more mindful of how cultural norms may be negatively impacted. The audience was able to experience an in-person discussion that challenged them to examine the double-edged aspects of technology's impact on local cultures.

Jayson: I led the second provocation, where I presented the provocation that AI should replace content teachers. This statement brought out some deep emotions, from fear to optimism. On the fearful side, CIES members struggled with the notion of replacing teachers with machines and losing humanity, that is the core of schools. On the hopeful side, members discussed the radical potential of advanced technology to create a more equitable learning environment. Given that less developed countries struggle to deliver advanced content and given that teachers in some of these countries lack advanced degrees, the discussion balanced pragmatism with the socioemotional needs of both teachers and learning. I reinforced how AI might deliver the content, but as scholars and practitioners of international development, we must rethink the purpose and role of teachers. That is, imagine a world where content training is no longer a hindrance to educational development - we might then reimagine a world where teachers engage students in more profound, more meaningful learning experiences. The teacher then shifts from a 'sage on the stage' to an experienced designer.

Jessica: I led the third provocation, posing the idea that educational technology policies should be globalized and standardized. I shared insights from EdTech Hub's work with Ministries of Education in low- and middle-income countries around developing national digitalization and education technology strategies and policies. I presented the concept that while these policies are rooted in a desire to modernize systems and establish structures to support learning outcomes and improve teachers' skills, these processes can be driven by political or financial agendas or by pressure from funding partners. These policies can also unintentionally exacerbate issues of marginalization. However, policies can

present an opportunity to create an effective education technology ecosystem, looking at infrastructure, learning resources, teacher professional development, equity and inclusion, as well as safety and privacy, among other components. To ensure a wide array of stakeholders and concerns are included in policy design and that there is a commitment to a holistic approach, I posed the concept of developing a global framework for policy creation. This idea evoked engaged discussion among conference participants. There was a range of concerns that a global framework would not accurately reflect the realities on the ground, particularly in the global south. There was an acknowledgement that there are best practices and lessons to be learned from similar contexts, but there seemed to be stronger inclinations to incorporate these on a national level rather than relying on a global framework that might not meet a country's needs.