

Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



Edited by
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27. Who cares about procurement?

Anne-Marie Scott and Brenna Clarke Gray

The COVID-19 pandemic saw an exponential increase in the adoption of commercial educational technology across the globe (Williamson, 2021; Williamson & Hogan, 2020), and in many jurisdictions there have continued to be efforts to embed these educational technologies into the “new normal”. With that in mind, it seems imperative not just to look more critically at educational technologies themselves, but also to interrogate and understand the procurement processes through which they come into being in our institutions.

In this chapter we explore the practices of procurement as we have experienced them within our respective roles in higher education. The format of the chapter is a slow conversation written over several months, a process which allowed us to expand our understanding of the topic by asking questions of each other, with pauses for reflection along the way. We come to this work with different roles and perspectives — Anne-Marie is a deputy provost, Brenna is a faculty coordinator of educational technologies — but with a shared belief that the practices of educational technology procurement in higher education are problematic and may actively work against ideas of what we think of as good in education. Amongst our concerns are that typical educational technology procurement practices do not centre educational expertise and ethical concerns (Whitman, 2021), do not account for the ways in which technology and pedagogy are entangled (Fawns, 2022), do not adequately capture the complexity and purpose of education (Biesta, 2015), that the profit motives (Facer, 2021) and increasingly extractive nature (Williamson, 2019) of commercial educational technology as a business may conflict with what we think of as “good”. We have tried in our conversation to go beyond critique and identify opportunities

for improvement, though we perhaps remain in a place where we believe that, even with improvement, current educational technology procurement practices may be fundamentally unfit for purpose.

Anne-Marie: Hey Brenna. So, it seems like we are co-writing a book chapter on procurement. I reckoned I always had a blockbuster keynote on edtech maintenance ahead of me, but nope. Procurement turns out to be the thing. So maybe it would be a good idea to explain to anyone reading this why we *do* care about educational technology procurement in higher education. I think we might both agree that procurement is one of those areas of higher education that is broken and in desperate need of disruption. So, maybe you could say a little bit more about the kinds of radical reinvention of procurement you'd like to see? I bet it involves blockchain...

Brenna: Ha! I use the brain cells I could spend on learning what blockchain is to ensure I never forget the words to any Lin-Manuel Miranda¹ songs. It is urgent work.

I first came to be curious — livid? — about procurement when I was a teaching faculty member. I considered myself engaged, I sat on all sorts of tech committees and so on, but still these technologies and services would be dropped into my lap, and I would be mandated to use them and I would think... where did this thing come from? Who asked for it? Have students used it? Do they like it? The studied disinterest with which these questions were met left me cold — it was impossible to get a meaningful answer.

Now that I have moved into faculty support on the education technologies side of the house, though, I find the work of procurement to be more important than only questions of consultation, like who is asked their opinion on a tool and how that opinion gets valued (though I still think that matters!). As I've learned more about tools like learning analytics, machine learning, facial recognition, and as I see how the

1 Lin-Manuel Miranda is a songwriter and playwright best known for the smash hit musicals *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*. If you are a parent to young children, you may better know him as the songwriter for films like Disney's *Moana* and *Encanto*. Brenna's joke about being "in the room where it happens" is a line from *Hamilton*; Alexander Hamilton is driven to become a legislator because he wants to be in that room. Brenna feels no similar compunction about becoming an academic administrator.

data from all of those things gets monetised, I have a lot of questions about how for-profit edtech products that employ such technologies are finding their ways into post-secondary classrooms. And I wonder whether the people signing the papers have a depth of knowledge of the ethical questions these technologies raise for many of us working in the field; can they see through the marketing lies of the people selling the tools? I know these tools and the way they are implemented is *legal*, but I am learning that legality is the floor of what we should expect of our technologies, and too often it is treated as the ceiling.

But alas, like a young Alexander Hamilton, I have never been in the room where it happens. You, intrepid administrator that you are, *have* been in the room. I'm wondering if your questions about procurement are the same (or more likely, much smarter) than mine?

Anne-Marie: Yeah — I've not just been in the room; I've driven the process on more than one occasion. I had the good fortune to have a Chief Information Officer (CIO) in my previous role who had crossed over from a commercial software company to run an enormous IT department in a large university, and he taught me all the tricks of the trade in terms of negotiation. I also learned a *lot* from him about how to drive out value from a procurement process (and I don't just mean cheapest price) and how to hold the balance of power. Every time a vendor offers you the opportunity to join a focus group to shape their product, never forget that this is actually free product development, that we are subject matter experts, and ask about what further discounts are on the table for that labour!

That's all to say that I think a lot of the problems we see in this space is because we cede our expertise as educators who work with technology far too easily and quickly. We cede it to IT departments because we let the technology become the dominant aspect in the process rather than the educational purpose, and IT departments in turn far too quickly cede expertise to edtech suppliers because of some sort of inherent belief that the market will provide and the expertise of suppliers outweighs our own. In reality, for many edtech products "little is known about how they work, whom they benefit and whether they work successfully" (Hillman, 2022). I'm talking in terms of broad generalisations here of course. Not all IT departments, not all edtech.

My own personal experience has also been that a certain set of instrumentalist and essentialist views of technology tend to persist in IT departments, along with an expectation to deliver on efficiency savings and value. Technology is simply a tool and is therefore neutral and any problems must be with our ability to use it; or that technology itself is the embodiment of the pedagogical principle, rather than what we do with it (Hamilton & Friesen, 2013). When one starts from that place philosophically then the marketing speak can be highly seductive and perhaps dilutes the chances of some of the critical ethical questions that we are both concerned about being asked.

Beyond the problematic specific technologies that you have already identified (analytics, machine learning, facial recognition etc), I believe that there has also been a broader move towards higher education as a site of value and ongoing wealth extraction (Hall, 2016, Komljenovic, 2021, Williamson, 2019). Edtech platforms and the stories that edtech companies tell are increasingly designed to exert a form of governance over user behaviours, which in turn begins to extend into influence over policy and decision making within universities. Educational technologies today, and the speculative stories about educational technologies tomorrow are tools through which the institution can be influenced and directed in order to safeguard and expand lucrative sources of revenue into the future (Facer, 2021, Komljenovic, 2021, Williamson & Hogan, 2020)

In my view this starts to represent an existential threat to higher education, and it reaches its zenith in some of the recent issues we've seen around proctoring technologies. When Proctorio (an online proctoring company that many universities pay for service) pursued legal action against a university employee who offered a critical analysis of the service (Corbyn, 2022), ostensibly to protect its business, it had a chilling effect on research activity (Selwyn et al., 2021). That cuts absolutely to the heart of our educational mission. If technology and pedagogy and research are connected, and we are unable to critically assess our own digital education practices, then our claim to having any kind of quality assurance capability starts to fall apart. How can we make any claims to providing "Good" education in those circumstances?

Since I am not an academic, but in fact a senior administrator, the tools in my kit bag tend to be policy and process. So, I am interested

in how we can improve procurement practices to ensure that the right questions are asked up front such that we don't admit companies and products into our institution that do harm. And I believe we can do this for educational technology because I've seen procurement policies for other kinds of purchasing in higher education that privilege ethical trading practices, or ethical working conditions for employees. It is not uncommon to have modern slavery policies, or favour Fairtrade products for example, and indeed I often joke that we spend more time thinking about the ethics of buying teabags in universities than we do technology. I believe that the same instrumentalist views of technology that I've already mentioned are what make procurement practices weak. If technologies are neutral, then there's no ethical issues to be concerned about. So, how do we change?

Brenna: I like this word "instrumentalist" because it's useful. Often, I think technology procurement has been seen as a fixtures and fittings issue, e.g. not in need of academic governance, but part of the business function of the university. And yet, as you rightly point out, universities *do* draw ethical lines around procurement practice all the time. Maybe not as often as we hope, but I vividly remember the Cola Wars on North American campuses in the 90s where student unions, starting with Carleton University in Ottawa in 1992, vociferously fought exclusivity agreements between campuses and PepsiCo due to Pepsi's continued trade in what was then Burma; when PepsiCo divested from Burma in response, many student unions turned their focus to Coca-Cola's human rights abuses in Nigeria (Klein, 2009). The quest for the least evil purveyor of sugary drinks seems a quite apt comparison.

You ask how we change that, and I wonder if the pandemic moment will have moved the needle at all when we are able to look back. I think it's suddenly become very clear for lots of instructors who may never have really thought about it before that the choice of technology is a choice that impacts teaching and learning. As people moved en masse to large-scale adoption of these tools out of necessity, it became more obvious how they shape, circumscribe, and transform pedagogy. And how they have continued to do so. This is a lesson borne out of moments of frustration and moments of possibility both, and it's not as easy as framing out a good and a bad.

Maybe it's just wishful thinking on my part because I want to kill the concept of "don't let the technology shape the pedagogy" — of course it does! Access to a pen and paper shapes pedagogy!

So, my hope is that teaching staff who have had the experience of seeing the effects of these tools on their teaching might want more of a say. As you note, we cede expertise too quickly, and while administrators certainly have the really important policy expertise in question, there is also teaching and learning expertise. Addressing the teaching and learning piece is hard for institutions, because it's unlikely that a single solution will work for the needs of every discipline — particularly at the regional comprehensives I am most familiar with where you might have a law school and a trade school and a nursing school on the same campus.

I'm also glad you brought up the chilling effect of research and critique. How often are the people who know most about the ethics of these tools from a research perspective — librarians, education faculty, sociologists, media studies educators, software engineers — invited to offer feedback on procurement processes? A common complaint in our institutions is that in-house expertise isn't respected — ask your resident organisational behaviourists how they feel about things down in the old salt mine — and I think this is a key example of where the pooled expertise of the institution is typically laid aside. But we also, as people who care about these issues, do have a responsibility to build and share expertise and explain why this is something that we should care about, and why those of us who are in a position to use our voices should be loud about it.

Since you have driven these processes, and since you know about the business decision calculus, I wonder if you've got some insights on where we go from here. Like, maybe the starting line is: what questions do you think should be asked that aren't, typically?

Anne-Marie: Well, I would like to think that in the procurements that I've run, the questions that did need to be asked were asked, but more important is *how* the questions are asked and weighted. Hold that thought as I'll come back to it in a moment...

In terms of any procurement process I have been involved with, the outcomes almost always failed to make everyone happy, so I think the point that you raised above about whether single solutions can work

for institutions that teach a wide variety of disciplines is key. Combine that with austerity measures and only the very richest institutions can afford multiple technologies with overlapping functionality, and even that doesn't always sit well with students who wonder why they have to learn so many specialist systems and question whether we are cohesive as an institution. Given that the large majority of us have to live in systems of constrained resources, for me the calculation starts with an acceptance that perfection isn't possible, and we're looking for best / least bad. I've spoken in a few places before about viewing a lot of this work through the lens of harm reduction as a useful way to view it and still stay sane.

The first question in my mind is who is out there in the market today, and what does the landscape look like? Knowing the market is key, because you need to know what the differentiators in the market are and you need to know a bit about risks. You also need to know what the market offers and what it doesn't in order to write a request for proposals (RFP) that will get you detailed enough information back on which to make a decision. So, whilst I absolutely believe that crowdsourcing requirements from across the institution to gather as much of that learning and teaching expertise as possible is crucial, **someone** needs to do some initial work of looking at just how many of those requirements are actually supported today.

As an example, in a lecture recording procurement I led, we all agreed that Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) integration with the Learning Management System (LMS) was a very important feature. Our early research showed that every major vendor already supported it, so although it was important to us as an institution, it wasn't going to be a differentiator in our RFP and therefore didn't deserve a high weighting. We also knew a bit from other colleagues about how various projects had gone elsewhere, so we knew we might want to ask some specific questions about implementation methodology, vendor project team / resources etc. We also crowdsourced functional requirements that seemed to be more future looking from academic and professional colleagues, and knowing that nobody had them in products today, we asked questions about roadmaps, and how we can influence development. Once technology is in an institution it tends to stick

around, so the quality of the relationship is almost as important as the feature set at any point in time.

What begins to emerge from that for me, is that there needs to be a high degree of pedagogical and technical knowledge and skill within a procurement team from the start. Just inviting your local learning technologist to score the solutions won't cut it. They need to be in from the ground building the procurement strategy based on their knowledge of the institution, the field, and the sector.

I'm highlighting this because most procurements involve giving some notion of weighting to the questions that you ask, and I have seen too many procurements result in a cheap product that is functionally a bad fit winning as the outcome because this weighting has been done badly or the wrong questions have been asked. Knowing not just what's important to you as an institution, but what is in the market, and crafting the right questions and weightings so that you drive out a decision based on the points that really matter is crucial.

One other group that I would say are rarely involved in procurement and should be are students (and we should pay them for their time). Nobody has the authentic experience of being a student today except a student today, and whilst no single student can speak for the entire student body, I have seen everybody involved lift their game and not default to lazy stereotypes when students are in the room. Vendors included. I've argued that if we can co-design our curriculum with our students, then we should also be co-designing the edtech used to deliver that curriculum (Scott & Nanfeldt, 2018), because, as we've said a few times now, pedagogy and technology are connected. Successful co-design of technology requires an investment of time into building trust and levelling out power relations (Dollinger & Lodge, 2018), and RFP processes typically are bounded by short timelines and dates.

That's all to say that knowing the right questions to ask *and* how to use the mechanisms of a procurement process to get the best decisions go hand in hand, and I think there are probably loads of examples out there where all the right questions *were* asked, and it produced the wrong decision.

That still doesn't answer your question about what questions should be asked that often aren't, but hopefully it helps explain that deciding

how to ask questions in a procurement is a real skill and one that I think is sadly missing in many cases.

If I was to make a hit list of questions beyond the specific features of any piece of edtech, these are some of the things I would include:

- Describe your process for product development, including how you involve your user community, how you carry out horizon scanning, and to what extent you draw upon best practice and research to inform this work. Include details of any beta testing programmes, product development committees etc.
- What percentage of revenue is re-invested into product development?
- What data does your system collect and what is it used for? Include details of how this is made visible to end users.
- Provide your product Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) detailing your accessibility compliance. How is the accessibility of your product validated? Provide details of testing done as part of regular release cycles as well as within product development.

There are many other questions I would ask in addition to these, but they would be more product specific. For example, if there was some automated decision making within the product, I would want to ask for a description of algorithms used, data factors that are important, and details of how any testing has been carried out to ensure that the potential effects of bias have been accounted for.

I'm interested in what you think about the above. What other questions would you ask? And as someone who has been a teacher and is now a learning technologist, where do you think those roles would fit in the above? And do you feel you've ever been well equipped in either of those roles to play a useful part? Or ignore these questions and take us in a different direction if something else stood out for you there!

Brenna: If I start with the last question first: no. Not even just do I not feel like I've been well-equipped, I've never been invited into a procurement process, either as teaching faculty or as a learning technologist, or even as a student or graduate student. (I agree with you that everyone defaults to lazy stereotypes about students less frequently when students are in

the room; now that I serve on a lot of committees as the faculty rep when people don't remember I'm faculty myself, I get to see a little bit of how lazy stereotypes are used about faculty, too. I am also very guilty of stereotyping senior management!) I can't overstate the extent to which these processes have always seemed like alchemy to me — and I am, most of the time, a pretty keyed-in, clued-in community member who sits on a lot of relevant committees and asks a lot of questions. I'm interested in how many people share the sense that all of this happens *somewhere else* that we are simply not able to access.

Obfuscation, it seems to me, is often the name of the game here. And that obfuscation often comes from vendors, but it isn't always easy to get meaningful answers out of our own institutions, either. I had some questions for my university, for example, about how our institutional [redacted cloud-based office suite and communication tool] was dealing with data and what features (behavioural trackers and reporting functions) were enabled. The response to my question was that I should file a Freedom of Information Act request. So I did, after baulking a little. And when the document that came back, months later, it didn't answer my questions. But I evidently don't have the expertise to know what I should be asking for at this point, because I thought I was asking a clear question and what I got back was... not. But then again, why should I need to have expertise beyond my functional and relatively high-level knowledge of both the tool and the basics of edtech ethics? Should I even have to have that? Especially in a publicly funded institution that deals with large amounts of data from individuals who have limited to no ability to meaningfully opt-out, and when these software contracts are paid for by taxpayers... What the heck justification is there for all of this being so shrouded in secrecy?

Ah, I see I have stepped away from the question of procurement with a wee rant. Anyway...

I'm grateful for your explanations of the kinds of questions that need to be asked and the high-level expertise needed to do this work well. It's not a reason to limit community consultation, of course — after all, ordinary faculty and staff sit on, say, the budget committee of senate and other complex, nuanced conversations. Collegial governance — the process of governance by shared relationships — is supposed to support all members of the community having a “look in” at all aspects of the

university. But I do get that this isn't as simple as an open consultation process and then buying the tool most people want.

That said, I use these tools extensively as one who builds resources and one who supports those who use them; my unique position as both the end user *and* the person most likely to be yelled at by the end user means that I do wish the user experience was something more institutional consideration went into. I use so few tools — and it's almost none of the institutionally sanctioned tools — in my day to day working life that bring me joy or pleasure. And I am one who takes joy and pleasure in using technology! The enterprise email, the LMS, the video platform, the videoconferencing tool, the word processor: at best they are all merely fine, and it's a good day when they don't actively impede my workflow. I know stuff has got to scale, and stuff that scales has to work a little bit for a lot of people, and stuff that works a little bit for a lot of people is going to be clunky at best. But it's also 2023, and we live our lives and do our learning in these spaces, and they still are so much more likely to bring frustration than pleasure.

And maybe there's no way to glean that in the procurement process. But I do often find myself wondering whether anyone who was in the room at the signing of the deal ever tried to use this [redacted] thing.

And I get what you say about harm reduction: I really do. I think that some work could be done around roll-out and messaging, often — okay, I'm leaving procurement again — but, like, if a suite was picked because it is the best on accessibility metrics A, B, and C, I would like to know that! It would absolutely frame my own usability critiques to know that. But usually that information — in my experience at the 6 or so places I've worked or learned, so not at all exhaustive — is not forthcoming.

I alluded to this before, but I do wonder about how much of the disconnect happening here stems from the massive sea-change we've experienced over the few years that have made the learning management system at most universities, and other learning technologies, move from a "nice to have" or even, as it has been at most places I have worked, a fringe interest, to absolutely central to the practice of teaching and learning. As such, I think more folks are more aware of how these tools circumscribe our options for teaching but the processes that govern them are mostly still designed for when it was the niche interest of the few. And the truth is that as individuals and institutions, we have values,

and yet the technology we have doesn't always align with those values. It seems like a problem to me.

I guess the question here is: is there a solution? I'm seeing the following critical points emerging over our conversation in terms of what we might call "must-dos":

- Involve key stakeholders, including students, staff, and faculty, not just in a blanket consultation but in the selection process itself. Pay the students for their time! And give the people in the room who are there as users time to develop an understanding of the scope of the questions to be asked.
- Establish a core procurement team that has a lot of pedagogical *and* technological expertise, including people who can speak to data ethics and privacy; accessibility; and diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Tell people what you're doing and why, to the extent that it's helpful and meaningful, and keep this transparency and clarity into the roll-out period.

At least that's what I'm taking home from this discussion. How about you?

Anne-Marie: I think in those 3 points above you're pretty much nailed my entire approach to procurement when I get to drive the process! Let me see if I can add a little more to the bones of it from my experience in case someone might be looking for a list of steps to follow:

1. **Know the market before you start.** Ask your friends, ask your colleagues, read the marketing rags, ask companies to come and show you their wares. Invite a range of colleagues into those product demos including faculty, learning technologists, students, IT colleagues. Procurement processes usually have some kind of pre-RFP process that you can use to get some show and tell sessions.
2. **Know what's important to you.** Canvas for requirements from as many stakeholder groups as possible. Synthesise and analyse those to develop an RFP that really drives out quality on the points that are both important to the institution, and differentiators.

3. **Involve your community.** Beyond consultation per above, construct an RFP process that allows different stakeholder groups to score the areas in which they have most expertise. Yes — like you say above, let faculty and students score the actual procurement. I like to give a percentage of the overall score to demos of the products and that's where I've often found it easiest to engage faculty as it involves least preparation on their part, and you can provide a light rubric to ensure you get the key points you need input on. That said I wouldn't exclude anyone from the formal scoring, but a key tactic of suppliers is to bombard you with masses of information in written answers, so I always want to be mindful of asking for academic engagement on fair terms. I'd also have data protection officers scoring, digital security colleagues, service desk colleagues etc. in the areas of an RFP where their expert judgement is required. Essentially anyone who's going to have to use / support / be responsible for the thing should be represented.
4. **Communicate.** Hopefully it's clear that by doing the things above in the order outlined you're actually building knowledge within the institution about what you're doing and why. Ideally, I would have the team scoring the RFP review and sign off the various question sets that they are scoring before the RFP is issued. It's important to take the time to prepare them for scoring by explaining the rationale behind why these are the questions (e.g. "we're not asking about XYZ feature because nobody does it, but we are asking about R&D and product development"). For anyone in Q&A sessions with the supplier it will equip them to participate actively. One of my proudest professional moments has been when I empowered a student in a procurement process to the extent that she took the supplier (nicely) to task and really nailed a concrete answer out of them rather than marketing-speak.
5. **Communicate again.** You raise an excellent point that the rationale behind the choice needs to be part of the rollout communications. When a choice is made, I like to write up some kind of news article or announcement for internal consumption.

I usually take it round various committees / councils and answer questions colleagues might have. Through the magic of re-use, such a thing can then be used by the rollout project as a first communication! I also like to share lists of who has been involved in all the activities listed above because it's really helpful both to properly recognise the effort that colleagues put into these processes, but also to be transparent about how the decision was made and who made it.

I liked your phrase "open consultation process" because I think that whilst there's definitely a place for expertise in this process — and I believe learning technologists sitting at the nexus of technology and pedagogy are crucial — I absolutely agree with you that our colleagues are plenty smart enough to cope with complicated matters. The clue is that we all work in universities. I also fundamentally believe that universities are collections of labour (kudos to Raewyn Connell here) and that the best outcomes are always going to come from working together. Why would we not want to run open and transparent processes as far as we are able and involve a wide range of colleagues (and I include students in that definition)? Does it not strengthen our institutional capacity? Bluntly, an institution that doesn't see a process like procurement as an opportunity to build knowledge and capacity isn't really thinking about what learning is and how it happens. Let's take a bet on how many of the same institutions have "lifelong learning" in their strategies and are engaged in some kind of digital transformation though...

One last point from me is that procurement isn't the end — it's just the start. You are completely right that rollout is a thing that happens after a procurement and the two things should be connected in ways that are obvious. So, I'll push your point on further and say that once rollout is complete, this stuff is then in our institutions, and it tends to hang around and evolve and grow over time. So, somebody has to do an ongoing job of liaising with suppliers, influencing product development, communicating change inside the institution, and holding suppliers to account. Supplier management is another subject in the digital education Dark Arts curriculum though, and so maybe that's another chapter for another book.

Seriously though, in a little over 4,600 words we've been able to explain the frustrations and impacts of these processes when not done

well. We've also identified a number of activities and common questions that could be widely adopted as some kind of standard practice in ways that we think would do good in higher education. So, my final question is, how do we get this change to happen? Do we need to start doing presentations at IT conferences to explain this stuff? Maybe a session titled "Learn these 3 cool hacks to unlock lifelong learning and digital transformation!" because I worry that we're talking in our own echo chamber sometimes.

Brenna: Well, I think the good news is that more people might be interested in the conversation now than ever before, for all the reasons we've discussed. So maybe this is the moment to try to do some professional development around these issues. IT conferences: yes! And I think, too, wherever it is that Provosts and Presidents hang out. I think there are good reputational risk management reasons to make the most senior leaders more aware of why they should care about this — but I guess probably a university is going to have to get sued before that happens. The lawsuit over Turnitin at McGill in 2004 (*Rosenfeld v. McGill University*) offers one such case; the student won his argument against compelled usage of Turnitin by making an argument that invoked the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and that decision perhaps explains why text-matching software is somewhat less ubiquitous in Canadian higher education than in the US, for example (Eaton & Christiansen Hughes, 2022). But I would like to know these kinds of risks are imagined before these cases end up in the courts.

But also, we need to engage these questions in teaching and learning circles and student unions, to talk about strategy and activism and key issues so that when consultation processes do come around, people are ready, and they know what to ask.

I think the process in general would be strengthened by more people having an understanding of it. I have to believe that once we understand the stakes, most of us, regardless of institutional role, probably want the same things: functional tools, good privacy protections, and ethical data use. More information — and conversations like this one! — are the place to start.

Anne-Marie: So, we took a break after writing the above, and got some good and helpful peer review feedback. One question that a reviewer

challenged us to consider is the extent to which the RFP decision making process itself is a problem? Public sector procurement practices use scoring/weighting mechanisms for some sense of transparency and accountability e.g. that a decision has been reached by a competitive process that gives suppliers a fair chance, and that there's a clear rationale for spending public money (OECD, 2015). But our reviewer challenges the extent to which these kinds of decisions can realistically be automated given that those involved in an RFP will be trying to make a decision about strategic fit, based on imperfect information, and a pre-determined set of scorings and weightings. We've talked a lot about how to make the existing decision-making process work better by asking better questions and having a wider range of people involved, but we've not really tackled the bigger question of whether we are just measuring what's easy to measure, rather than what we truly value?

It seems to me that our RFP processes force us to reduce a set of pedagogical contexts, purposes, and values (Fawns, 2022) into a set of (more neutral?) functional requirements that can be scored and weighted easily. In that sense we are already consigned to working with poor proxies for what we are really trying to achieve before we even begin. There is a very real chance then that our edtech procurement process is an exercise in trying to minimise the "crapshoot" effects of such a scored/weighted process (because we are working with inaccurate proxies for what we want), or an exercise in creative scoring to game the system after the fact, or a bit of both. Ultimately this all sounds like we're primarily trying to minimise the possibility of being sued for unfair practices, or slapped for spending public money badly, rather than ensuring we buy edtech that could underpin "Good" education. I might define that broadly as edtech that liberates knowledge and learning, allows agency, and opens up possibilities, rather than locks down information, extracts value from the labour of students and teachers, or creates harm through bias. That doesn't feel very ethical at all, now that I think about it.

What're your thoughts? Is it the case that we're trying to force a set of procurement processes into producing better quality outcomes when in fact they're fundamentally and not at all designed to do so because it's very hard to score something like a set of values?

Brenna: We really are back at this question of whether we are measuring what is important or what we can measure. It seems to me that you're

asking: are the rubrics we can imagine currently for procurement processes really up to the task? I have to conclude not, given the kinds of tools that are ending up on our desks. If I'm right in my Pollyanna-ing above, that we all really do want the same outcome, then it's clear to me that we need a new process. And maybe we need to give up on the idea that there's a way to capture values and ethics on a scorecard from one to ten.

Of course, there's also the issue that every teacher experiences in their life — that rubrics, well, they kind of suck. Or at least they flatten differences between key priorities. If ethics score a 4 out of 10 and usability scores a 10 out of 10, the pure math might make this a 7 out of 10 tool — but I don't weight ethics and usability equally. The rubric needs to be carefully set up to determine how we demonstrate our values, and those are the hard conversations that need to happen before the procurement process gets underway.

Conclusions

Our peer reviewers cannily noted that we were lacking some of the "good" expected in a collection titled "HE for Good". Where, they asked, is the hopefulness in our chapter? The truth is that procurement is a difficult nut to crack — it seems boring from the outside, it's not well-understood by the vast majority of staff and students in higher education, and the opacity of the narratives about it don't make for engaging reading. And yet it's the genesis of how all tech tools — the good and the bad — find their way to our desks.

We hope that this chapter has made clear the pressing urgency of all of us engaging with processes of procurement. We offer here suggestions on how to bring ethic of care thinking to the procurement process. The "good" in this chapter comes from our overarching belief and hope that when we know better, we will do better, and that, at a minimum, we all ultimately want the same things from the technologies we offer to our colleagues and students: safety, privacy, accessibility, and equity. The work of centring those values in our procurement practices is not the scope of one essay; it is the practice of a lifetime for all of us. Let us undertake this work together and ensure that the HE of the future is one where technology truly serves as a net good for everyone.

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