In *Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age* (2014), Rosamund Sutherland offers a conceptual framework and concrete recommendations for contemporary teaching and learning. Noting a distinction between skills-based vocational models and knowledge-based academic curriculum, Sutherland argues that the latter must be made available for students from all backgrounds to ensure access to life opportunities, many of which require technological proficiencies. The task of preparing students for college and career is increasingly shaped by emergent technologies across academic disciplines and economic sectors. It is therefore imperative that children and young adults learn to adeptly navigate infrastructures built for communication in an era of increased digitization of content and workflows. Effectively engaging the digital is often referred to as a new form of literacy for the new century. In her study, Sutherland makes an important contribution to this discussion by documenting persistent structural inequalities in education and providing a social justice framework for the reconceptualization and application of technology in the classroom. Arguing that digital technologies alone cannot change social inequalities, she nonetheless advocates their use as pedagogical resources. Her book poses critical questions and offers practical recommendations deeply relevant to researchers and practitioners in the field of education.

Sutherland begins her book, which is both theoretically informed and deeply grounded in the context of the classroom, with a personal reflection on her own family’s relationship to education and literacy. This is a moving section, and it sets a personal tone to the text that also lends it an authoritative dimension beyond her strong academic credentials. She situates herself within the discourse with openness and honesty, examining how the educational system in the United Kingdom has provided her with opportunities to develop and flourish in life. Her self-described “optimistic disposition,” which draws her toward “the art of the possible,” is balanced by a clear-eyed reportage of her research findings, which consistently demonstrate class divides
in society reflected in the schools (5). She explains that the book “has been inspired by [her]
desire to write about the persistent and pervasive injustices within the English educational
system” (1). To take just one example of “areas of deprivation” in which many working-class
children find themselves, compared to the “relatively privileged state comprehensive education”
for her own children, she notes that “less than 5% of young people from the Withywood
community attended university compared with almost 50% in the more prosperous areas of the
city” (6). “This is not a difference between state and private education systems,” she insists, but
rather a difference in funding based on the location of public schools. Withywood, with its
geographical compression of working-class families, is not as well-resourced as the urban
middle-class schools (6). As the reference to these local statistics makes clear, in its specific
case studies, this book will be of interest primarily to educators and researchers in the UK. But
its conceptual framework, incisive general critique, and concrete recommendations for practice
can be read transnationally; audiences in the United States, where the book is widely available,
will find much that is transferable to their particular teaching and learning contexts.

The scope of Sutherland’s inquiry is quite broad. She offers a brief historical overview of
technology in education, a discussion of its possibilities and limitations, and a general critique of
dominant approaches in the field. One element that is missing from her study is an engagement
with specific forms of digital literacy. Her belief that “paper-based forms of literacy are still
important aspects of education” goes some length in explaining this absence; however, from the
standpoint of the audience, in-depth coverage of digital literacy would also be extremely useful
(111). For while her commitment to paper-based forms of literacy is meritorious, readers
seeking detailed analyses of instructional technologies will need to look elsewhere. Sutherland
focuses instead on a broader frame of metacognition, or the reflection upon one’s own thinking,
and transfer, or the application of previously acquired knowledge to new situations. She uses
the metaphor of a “toolkit,” from which students can select and apply their abilities across tasks
(117). The book is at times quite general, and could be said to be lacking in specificity. This is
its one shortcoming. Sutherland overcomes this deficit quite substantively and productively in her theoretical framing of the general issues she raises. The conclusions she draws from this framework have significant implications for the way we approach students, classrooms, and technology.

The author argues that “the purpose of education is to develop the capabilities that enable young people to both flourish as human beings and participate in society” (11). She derives the term “capabilities,” an important vocabulary for her social justice perspective, from the work of economist Amartya Sen. She uses his definition and elaboration of the term to make an important distinction between educational approaches. The “dominant” approaches, in her view, understand students in terms of “human capital,” to be measured through the rubric of “economic growth.” For a counterpoint, she looks to Sen, her most important interlocutor. His conceptual framework of “human flourishing” understands capabilities as “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being;” the perspective seeks to articulate “the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (32). Sutherland argues that emergent technologies are resources upon which individual students can draw in order to further and deepen their capabilities. I would strongly recommend her application of Sen’s theoretical frame to those who, like Sutherland, are working toward an ideal of education as a foundational element of well-being, development, and justice.

This framework lends complexity to the disarmingly straightforward central argument of the book. She writes,

A curriculum for a just society has to recognize the competing ideologies in the 21st century curriculum, which centre around a tension between knowledge and skills. I suggest that there is a divide with respect to the curriculum being offered in schools, and that this divide tends to be patterned along social class lines. Schools that serve predominantly working-class communities are more likely to have adopted a skills-based curriculum, with an emphasis on vocational courses, whereas schools that serve more
middle-class communities are more likely to offer a knowledge-based curriculum, with an emphasis on academic courses. (10)

Sutherland’s strongest observational point is her attention to this tension between traditions of disseminating knowledge and developing employable skills. Her claim, following this observation, is that the tendency to focus solely on skills development within a vocational trajectory limits the capabilities and opportunities of low-income students. Therefore, educators working in communities marginalized by economic hardship must insist upon a robust knowledge based curriculum, perhaps alongside skills development. Sutherland suggests that technology in the classroom can support both imperatives, but only if engaged thoughtfully; otherwise “there is likely to be very little impact of digital technologies on teaching and learning” (28).

As Sutherland’s arguments above make clear, her findings and frameworks are actionable. Advocacy of knowledge based curriculum is her primary recommendation. Secondly, she writes that there is an urgent need to take “collective responsibility when tackling the manifestly severe injustices that exist with respect to education” (131). To make education reform a truly collective endeavor, she encourages the emphasis of collaboration over competition, proposing a multifaceted strategy for implementing cooperative work. First, she argues that students must learn collaboration as a foundational skill; second, she endorses “academic researchers working cooperatively with teachers,” which, she notes, “is very different from the current system in which educational academics are usually separated in their practice of research from teacher practitioners” (136). Lastly, in order for cooperation to flourish, at the level of the student, the teacher, and the researcher, schools must become more flexible institutions (132). Having undertaken an extensive collaborative project with teachers, which she details in her eighth chapter, one that resulted in the development of a new model of professional development for educators, Sutherland is in an authoritative position to advocate cooperative practices (135).
Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age will be most useful to those whose work is situated at the intersection of education and social justice issues related to class difference. For education researchers who observe and collaborate with low-income school districts, Sutherland’s work will be an important theoretical touchstone. Instructors in such districts will find that the book substantiates the work they are doing to support students beyond vocational training. Furthermore, if her work finds an audience in those who write education policy, her findings have the potential to inform the funding structures that underwrite programs aimed at broadening access for low-income students. She does direct one of her arguments, in particular, toward policy makers; she writes against high-stakes performance measures, which emphasize skills over knowledge, and argues instead for “radical changes to the assessment system so that teachers can focus on teaching for engagement with knowledge, as opposed to ‘teaching to the test’” (11). For each of these distinct audiences, Rosamund Sutherland makes an important contribution to the reshaping of contemporary educational practices by re-framing the critical discussion of 21st century literacies as a social justice issue.