viewpoint

Fiona Nelson

Technology For What?

Martin Buber reminds us that "a child is educated by relationships." It is through their relationships that children become good students, citizens and parents … or not. Much of what shapes a child is not content, but context: encouragement or antipathy, respect or salesmanship tolerance or intimidation.

That's something to consider in reflecting on the role of technology in education. Education consists of some very fundamental things, things that go far beyond the rote "learning" now in favour. Not least among them: the capacity to filter and judge information. A lot of education, especially in the fundamentalist view, is the mere aggregation of information. But a constant stream of information provides no instruction on how to apply, rank, and judge it. Instead, these things are learned in the course of relationships, as a child begins to fathom the teacher's viewpoint, and through that learns to interpret and order the information he or she aggregates.

The new information technologies make it all the easier to aggregate information in ways that are bedazzling and mesmerizing. They may even be useful and provide for a certain kind of literacy. However, University of Toronto distinguished professor emeritus Ursula Franklin makes the point: "future citizens may gain in computer literacy at the expense of moral literacy or knowledge of history, and it seems to me quite debatable which agenda of education is more in the public interest."[1]

One wonders whether computers have replaced television as a new panacea for all that is said to ail education. I remember, 40 years ago, when educational television was trumpeted as a means to engage students (and reduce our dependence on teachers). In the final analysis, as McLuhan recognized, the means was the end: the medium was the message, and it had little to do with education.

Neil Postman poses the questions that should have been asked at the time. "What is television? What kinds of conversation does it permit? What are the intellectual tendencies it encourages? What sort of culture does it produce?" We should pose the same questions about computers.

As Postman observes: "We might say that a technology is to a medium as a brain is to the mind. Like the brain, a technology is a physical apparatus. Like the mind, a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology, in other words, is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates."[2]

We are, most of us, aware of the bias of language as a medium, as we review expressions and turns of phrase that were formerly considered neutral but now seem to be more harmful than good. If that's true of the language many of us were taught in, do we know what we are promoting when we embrace computer technology, and with it, a medium that exists alongside and even replaces conversation?

To an extent much greater than most realize, society is built on conversation. Conversation itself is haphazard because the language we employ may not be language others understand in

I don't think I can emphasise that enough. Consider John Kenneth Galbraith's reflection on misplaced priorities: "One is the ease and abundance with which money is available for the television that children now so intensively watch as compared with the money provided for their schools and the pay of their teachers. The other is how readily resources are available for the military as opposed to resources for the educational establishment."[3]

Obviously, America is a little different, but the question is useful all the same: sexy investments or investments in the so-called national interest may be just a glib way of trying to avoid the age-old problem of negotiating a conversation. Do we know what we are doing?

1   Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1990), 69.

2   Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 84.

3   John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 74.

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the same way. But conversation opens the way for a negotiation of meaning. In conversation, we can establish a common context that allows us to draw on every resource the community commands. It may seem as simple as a kindergarten exercise or as complex as an ESL class even though the same process underlies both.

New technologies are certainly engaging, but do they create relationships, let alone foster the transmission of the critical faculties of judgement and assessment people require to navigate their daily lives? Do they allow for a negotiation of meaning. Or are they simply a convenient vehicle of distraction?

In the workaday world, people are surrounded by ceaselessly insistent technologies that give them neither pleasure nor pause – but which keep them constantly engaged, or better, busy. Time for reflection and intelligent conversation diminishes with saddening regularity every year. Yet both reflection and conversation are crucial for establishing a context in which the world unfolds – and in which the world could unfold. Without that context, people are prey to the blandishments of marketers and demagogues.

I don't want to raise the spectre of a computer Fuehrer, but my plea is this: what are we preparing our children for, and how are we doing it? Do we want them engaged so we don't have to bother with the complexities of establishing relationships, so that we don't have to negotiate meanings and then take responsibility for our end of the conversation?

Computers, the Internet, e-mail and all the like are only tools. They must not become the medium, for then they become our masters, robbing us of time and pause for reflection.