

Debunking the Digital Classroom

Rethinking the Virtues of “Tech Literacy”

Who could argue with a report that is dedicated to the memories of the children’s television personality Mr. Rogers and the keen technology critic Neil Postman? Surely not us. And in fact, there is much good sense in the Alliance for Childhood’s new study, “Tech Tonic: Towards a New Literacy of Technology.”

A non-profit organization based in Maryland, the Alliance for Childhood has a vague but anodyne mandate—it “promotes policies and practices that support children’s healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living.” In this report, the group makes the following bold claim: “There is scant evidence of long-term benefits—and growing indications of harm—from the high-tech life style and education aggressively promoted by government and business.”

The report brings a welcome and much-needed deflation of the hype surrounding “tech literacy.” Politicians and celebrities have long used the idea as a proxy for talking about the difficult challenges facing the American educational system. In September, for example, basketball star Magic Johnson announced the opening of a tech literacy and computer center in

Cincinnati, one of sixteen now open in inner cities across the country, as part of a partnership with the Hewlett-Packard corporation. “This is about the children,” Johnson told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. “This is a start to letting them know they can become anything they want to be, but they can’t do it unless they have a level playing field. They must know how to work a computer.”

The report levels steady criticism at many of the assumptions about technology made in President George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” educational initiative. But there has long been a bipartisan enthusiasm for “wired” classrooms. Not mentioned in the report was that the promotion of technological literacy was also central to President Clinton’s “Call to Action for American Education in the 21st Century.” The Clinton Education Department’s “four pillars” included: “connect every school and classroom in America to the information super-highway; provide access to modern computers for all teachers and students; develop effective and engaging software and online learning resources as an integral part of the school curriculum; and provide all teachers the training and support they

need to help students learn through computers and the information super-highway.”

But do computers really help children learn? Should technological “literacy” really be a central component of childhood education? The evidence compiled by the Alliance for Childhood suggests that it should not be, and offers a new definition of “technological literacy”: “the mature capacity to participate creatively, critically, and responsibly in making technological choices that serve democracy, ecological sustainability, and a just society.” Whether thinking about “ecological sustainability” will make American eight-year-olds more literate is an open question, but the larger point is actually sound.

The report also catalogues the deleterious effects of too much time spent passively consuming television, surfing the Internet, or playing video games, and argues, “to the extent that we allow children to be distracted by ‘virtual’ realities, both childhood and our democracy will be impoverished.” As a recent study in the medical journal *The Lancet* found, researchers “linked watching two or more hours of television a day in childhood and adolescence with serious long-term health risks” such as obesity, high cholesterol, and cardiovascular problems. After reading the thorough examination of the effects of technology on young minds, it is hard not to agree with the report’s conclusion that “at the elementary school level and below, there is little evidence of lasting gains and

much evidence of harm from hours spent in front of screens,” be they television, video game, or computer screens.

Technological libertarians will surely view the Alliance’s conclusions as evidence of neo-Luddism. But in the near-universal embrace of high-tech education, we have avoided confronting a very important fact: there is no reliable evidence that computers in every classroom actually improve children’s ability to learn. On the contrary, “to ignore that technologies can substitute as well as extend human powers,” the report notes, “is to ignore the fact that humans are not born fully developed.... It is only internal growth that generates the maturity necessary to give moral and ethical direction to the use of those powerful tools.”

Not everyone will agree with some of the report’s points of emphasis. In its discussions of commercial marketing and technologies, for example, the report spends more time criticizing the corporations hawking products to children than discussing the responsibilities of parents to monitor and tame children’s consumption of those products.

There is also some overwrought fretting about the citizenry: TV-molded citizens may lose their problem-solving skills until they “prefer to pass on ... tough decisions and let authoritarian government or centralized corporate offices shape the future for them.” Similarly, the report’s frequent ecological discussions occasionally seem unduly anxious and outright odd,

such as the report's praise for a Canadian school's construction of a "Peace Garden," where students could "nurture peace' within themselves" while sitting around a "Peace Pole." Low-tech fairy tales are just as likely, after all, to leave our children illiterate, as we learned years ago with the "whole language" movement.

But the report suggests a new arena in which conservative Americans, who tend to worry about the content provided by technologies, and liberal Americans, who are concerned with the corporations that market and manufacture these technologies, might meet. Critics from the left and right can both agree with some of the broad proposals the report makes: to slow

down and allow children to develop according to the pace of childhood, not the pace of technology; the idea that "choice implies limits—and the option to say 'No'"; and a recognition that "technology is not destiny; its design and use flow from human choices." It is not enough to teach our children to use new technologies; we must also teach them to think about where those technologies come from, what they are encouraging them to do, and whether they promote or stifle genuine human achievement. This is common sense, too often ignored by those in the thrall of new gadgets, theories, or fads that promise to make educating the young painless, efficient, and fun.