

**Article. Oct. 2000. “Child and the Machine” by Dennis F. Tupman**

### **High Touch or High Tech?**

For years now in many school districts most of the equipment dollars have been spent on computers, not to mention the costs of repairing and replacing them.

Other subject areas have often had to go begging or simply take a back seat (or raise their own funds) in the face of this technological juggernaut.

Parents and students understandably are concerned for their children’s welfare in training for the job market. It would seem it follows that schools address this public concern, and provide rich technological experience as part of a good general education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But have we gone overboard?

Some years ago John Naisbitt expressed it this way in his popular book, “Megatrends”. He suggested that there would be a need to balance in the future “high tech with high touch”, in other words machine with human concerns. His words seem prophetic. There have been lately an increasing number of articles in the popular press pointing out education deficits as we rush headlong to embrace technology.

Armstrong and Chambers, two Canadian authors, have recently written an exhaustive book on this topic called “The Child and the Machine” (Key Porter Books). While these authors point out the many benefits of learning how to use computers as an effective tool in education, they also raise a number of concerns about what is now happening in many of our schools.

Todd Oppenheimer, in an Atlantic monthly article (July 1997) called the “The Computer Delusion”, is even more caustic and alarmed. In this article he quotes the eminent media critic, Neil Postman who stated: “I thought that television would be the last great technology that people would go into with their eyes closed. Now you have the computer.”

Clifford Stoll, in a book called “Silicon Snake Oil: Second thoughts on the Information Highway”, said this: “We loved them (computers) because we didn’t have to think for an hour, teachers loved them because they didn’t have to teach, and parents loved them because it showed their schools were high-tech. But no learning happened.” (1995)

In a book entitled “Endangered Minds: Why Children Don’t Think and What We can Do About it” Jane Healy, psychologist, points out that hands-on experience cannot not be replaced by computer activity. Dancing, writing, movement, painting, music, story telling, and so forth are still more stimulating to the brain than more two-dimensional activity on the computer, especially with primary grade children.

Neil Postman says that there is no really solid research to support using computers at all in the very lower grades.

These are but a few of the increasing number of critics lamenting about what many are doing with tech studies, especially in the elementary grades. I know of a number of elementary schools where they have abandoned their computers.

What has this to do with music and the arts in education?

A lot.

We have seen in many elementary schools across Canada music and other arts specialists being laid off or reassigned and replaced by computer specialists. We have noticed budgets in the arts slashed and reallocated to tech studies. We have observed time in the arts reduced in elementary schools in order to fit in computer courses, even down to kindergarten. We have seen activity, arts, and music rooms taken over by computer labs in elementary schools.

And elsewhere? Enrollments have generally substantially decreased in arts and humanities courses in universities and even in many secondary schools while tech course numbers have risen. (Statscan)

Todd Oppenheimer laments that there is even not any solid research to support a lot of what we are doing with computers in the lower grades. He says that equipment failures, lack of teacher training, inadequate facilities, poor software – all add up in many instances to a waste of time. And this, one might ask, at the expense of a solid, sequential, well supported and taught arts program?

In a previous article I quoted Don Tapscott, CEO of a high tech company in Canada. He had published a position paper signed by 30 other high tech company CEO's stating that we have in our elementary, secondary and even university education gone overboard on techie - type training at the expense of general education in the arts, liberal arts, and even the sciences. (April 2000, National Post). These CEO's were calling for balance. They were concerned enough to speak out. As one superintendent in Moose Jaw said to me, "How unfortunate that this leadership seems to be coming from the business and not from the education sector."

Tapscott and others say that we need more emphasis on creativity, interpersonal skills, ability to work with others, skill to express oneself, self confidence in meeting with people, ability to draw inferences, and think creatively "out of the box". In short high touch human skills.

In a casual look at any arts IRP or curriculum one will notice the above-mentioned skills are important learning outcomes of a good arts education. And a whole lot more!

We do not have to reinvent the wheel. We just have to make sure that the staff, resources (time and money), and administrative support at all levels are maintained in order that our music and arts programs thrive. As one can see many people are coming out and speaking for this balance in education: between the head and the heart, between high touch and high tech, between machine and human perspectives.

The arts and music in the overall balanced school curriculum have been proven by solid research that they assist in learning in other subject areas. Or conversely, when one minimizes the arts and music it follows that learning in other areas will likely suffer. There is some urgency, then, to restore balance in the educational programme for the benefit of the students who need it.

The information and research shown in the above articles and books need to be discussed in our staff rooms and board meetings. We need to have a district policy that reflects this balance between high touch and high tech. How do your districts and schools measure up?

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