Educational Compuphilia: The new assault on mental health in schools

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Abstract

If there is a salient defining condition of the modern age, it must surely be our tenacious belief in technology. Here it is argued that our insatiable infatuation with the computer or what is termed 'compuphilia', represents a serious and growing threat to the mental health of school children. Computers may make communication easier, but they also ensure it is less intimate and more detached. A considerable literature is now accumulating to show that there is a direct relationship between the depth of the bonds which students form with teachers, their level of connectedness, and their mental well being, which in turn determinately affects educational outcomes. In this paper it ie argued that the more virtual the classroom becomes, the more disconnected students become.

In recent years a considerable literature has accumulated to show that the traditional separation of pedagogic goals from learning programs designed to enhance the psycho-social and spiritual well-being of young people is not only philosophically misguided but serves also as an impediment to maximal educational attainment (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). Although interest in the role played by psycho-social and spiritual well-being (hereafter referred to as 'integrated well-being') has for several decades found expression in philosophical , psychological and sociological research, a new awareness or 'consciousness' is emerging which explicitly acknowledges its profound educational importance (Griffiths & Cooper, 2005). Reinforcing one dimension of this new awareness of the educational importance of integrated well-being are several studies which establish that the quality relationships which young students develop with their teachers may play a critical role in their personal constructions of self-esteem, motivation to learn, and

confidence to take on new challenges, all of which have proven to be salient factors contributing to integrated well-being and overall academic achievement (Monfries &   McAlpine, 2005; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004; Zins et al., 2004; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001).

As Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder (2001) propose, there is a determinate association between the secure attachments which students form with teachers and resultant levels of subjective happiness and integrated well-being. This correlation is, in turn, accompanied by better attendance, better classroom behaviours and improved academic performance. Monfries & McAlpine (2005) also argue persuasively that the earlier students can establish secure attachments to teachers and significant others, the more likely it is that behavioural problems will be self-mediated and limited.

Given the importance of the subtle connections which exist in regard to the secure bonds formed between teachers and students, integrated well-being and enhanced academic performance, the central aim of this paper is to explore philosophically the extent to which the current trend towards computer based learning, including on-line teaching, may serve inadvertently to discourage the development of such inter-personal attachments. If this is the case, the sense of integrated well-being, which is of fundamental importance not only for students but also for teachers, may be marginalised, thereby limiting the potential of students to learn and teachers to teach.

The Technological Connection: Can Schools Be Too Plugged In?

Given the increasing awareness of the pedagogic importance of the depth of bonding between students and teachers, there is a mordant irony in the fact that so little critical reflection exists which questions whether computer-based learning is systematically depersonalizing the school environment. To understand the source of this irony we first need to comprehend why western culture is far too quick to applaud the success of technology, yet strangely slow to recant its indiscretions. Given that technology is now a defining characteristic of the modern age, western culture is more inclined to embrace new technologies unreflectively than to assess them critically. One plausible explanation for this discrepancy is that technology has itself come to function as the standard measure of progress and thus as the primary means of resolving problems.

If this is true it is perhaps not so surprising that computechnology has been assimilated into the school curriculum more as a matter of course than as a consequence of rational assessment and philosophical discussion. Within the culture of what will be referred to as 'compuphilia', the admonitions of philosophical thinkers such as Stoll, proffered a decade ago, were barely audible. In hindsight, the trust placed in computer-based education may not have been earned but rather inherited as part of our socio-cultural commitment to the technological worldview. We have seemingly become so bedazzled by the power of technology to let us walk upon the earth as giants that we have failed in the educational context to discern that we now walk the earth as blinded technological giants who have lost our way? As Stoll states, 'a poor substitute it is this virtual reality where frustration is legion and where – in the holy name of Education and Progress – important aspects of human interaction are relentlessly devalued' (Stoll, 1995: 4).

Technological power does not in itself bequeath philosophical vision, and without that vision we have only a shadow of a picture of what it is that gives education its value and which, in turn, confirms that the educational goals we seek are worth pursuing. In a study conducted on computer use in American schools by Warschauer *et al* (2004), it was claimed that placing computers and Internet connections in schools, especially in low socio-economic status schools, did little to address the serious educational challenges faced by those schools. Thus, even when it is readily accepted that the bonds between students and teachers represent an integral constituent of effective pedagogy, the suspicion that computer-based education could possibly be an impediment to such bonding is rarely voiced.

Theologizing Technology

The concept of technology is admittedly multifaceted, and it is no part of our purpose here to get mired in the semantic morass of definitional demarcation which surrounds it. Suffice to say, there exists a subtle but monumental difference between the sense of technology as it refers to the specific machines, tools or devices we use to direct or facilitate our interactions with the world around us, on the one hand, and the sense of technology as a *Weltbild* or conceptual scheme within which we actually view the world, on the other. The important distinction to be made is that we no longer simply use technology; *we live it.* As a consequence technology is ascribed an authority and priority in our lives that is

tantamount to theologizing it. We literally experience our existence in the midst of our technologies, and use technology to become co-creators of a technological world. Our lives, our movements, and even our values become technologically textured. In a bizarre sense it could be said that in doing so we unwittingly 'sacralize' what is in essence 'secular' and secularize what is in essence sacred.

Postman reminds us, however, that utopia is no more present to us in cyberspace than it is on earth (Postman, 1995). Because we are surrounded by and immersed in the technological texturing of our lives, we tend not to notice how profoundly technology has impacted on every aspect of our lives, including the sacredness of our relationships with each other. Indeed, what might be called the 'theology of technology' has become so pervasive that educators are seduced into thinking that they cannot live without the materialist catechism it extols. As a result we are blinded to the growing body of evidence derived from human experience which strongly suggests that it will become increasingly difficult to live with it.

It is certainly worth contemplating that the unbridled commitment of western culture to technology, and thus to the uncritical acceptance of computechnology within education, is a consequence of theologizing technology in such a way that it becomes a 'value presumption' of our educational paradigm. Compuphilia is born out of a cultural womb which nurtures technology as a form of social salvation. It follows that our belief in the value which technology serves as foundational to the way in which we see the world becomes fossilised as a doctrinal belief within education against which all other educational beliefs are judged. Our belief in the value of technology is thus shifted from the status of a hypothesis for continued testing to a theologized dogma of science which characterizes the conceptual measures by way of which we test. Despite findings which suggest, for example, that technology does little 'to overcome or minimize educational inequalities' (Warschauer, Knobel and Stone, 2004, 584) we persist in believing that technology is the panacea for all our problems, even those of a non-technological nature. The tenacity of compuphilia is so resilient that even when a particular problem has no immediate technological solution, we persist in believing that improved technology will solve the problem and make things better, without ever considering the extent to which the 'improved technology' can actually make things worse.

The rub is that many of these problems relate to human relationships which make life itself worth living. Because our culture has become so

distracted from the task of living simply, we assume that life is necessarily complex. Hence we technologise our lives as a self-fulfilling prophecy of our power to complicate our lives unnecessarily. The conceptual difference between a better standard of living and a better quality of life takes on a special force in this context. In the absence of sufficient philosophical consideration requisite for its balanced expression, our unrestrained educational commitment to computechnology remains problematic and requires re-evaluation. Whatever the result of this ongoing debate, it is incontestable that technological development with regard to improved standards of living should never be confused with the deeper question of whether what we dub as 'progress' stands unequivocally as a commensurate gain in our quality of life. On this point, Arcilla elaborates:

> By struggling to preserve liberal learning in this way, we may come to a more acute sense of its gaping absence in the dominant entertainment culture of our information society. For some time, it has been in retreat; now one of its last refuges is being stormed. Perhaps this will embolden us to question, finally, the cost of this society to our humanity. And so to find that humanity once again (2002, 465).

In the final analysis, our cultural belief in the technological approach to the world is so determinately entrenched as a defining characteristic of the educational paradigm that it functions *not* as a belief to be tested but as, what Laura calls an 'epistemic primitive' by way of which we characterise the way we test (Laura, 1978). From a different vantage, Postman has remarked that

> ... at the moment it is considered necessary to introduce computers into classrooms...To the question 'Why should we do this?' the answer is: 'To make learning more efficient and more interesting'. Such an answer is considered entirely adequate, since...efficiency and interest need no justification. It is, therefore, not usually noticed that this answer does not address the question 'What is learning for?' 'Efficiency and interest' is a technical answer, an answer about means, not ends; and it offers no pathway to a consideration of educational philosophy (Postman, 1995:171).

On the assumption that the philosophical caveats expressed here have at least some heuristic value, it is easier to appreciate why reflective debate on the tension between computer-based education on the one hand and the most effective educational contexts for forging strong student-teacher bonds on the other is long overdue.

Computechnology and Depersonalization

We are now in a position to make explicit our main reservations about computer-based education. The persistent claims and promises for the most recent innovations in computer mediated communication are inescapable. This technological 'advance', it is argued, will bring to our lives knowledge, power, pleasure, personal liberation, even personal salvation (Brook & Boal, 1995, viii). Based on this rationale, whatever is lacking in our lives can be provided by way of greater access to new forms of communication, entertainment and information. Obviously we have no wish to deny the many benefits which computechnology makes available both inside and outside the classroom. Nor do we wish to contest that in certain contexts computechnology may both encourage and facilitate the cultivation of personal relationships across the continuum of human interchange. The problem to which we are alluding is a different one, and its resolution depends on qualitative rather than quantitative considerations.

The first consideration to be addressed relates to the fact that while it is clear that appropriate contexts exist for the use of computechnology, western culture, partly due to vested political and economic interests, has generalised the specific cases of acceptable use in such a way that the application of technology becomes universal. For example, it is only a few years since it was acknowledged that enrolment procedures for some students could be made more administratively 'efficient' by enrolling 'on-line'. Shortly thereafter, it was legislated that enrolments for all students should be organised on-line. From a specifically justified example of the use of computechnology in one context, an almost imperceptible extrapolation is made which universalizes the principle in other contexts in which it has not been justified. We thereby diminish options for students by standardising procedures which by their very nature discourage face to face interchange. Because provision of on-line courses for distance students may be justified, by parity of reasoning, it does not follow that any justification has been provided to show that all university courses should be offered solely on-line.

By embracing the theologised form of secular life within which the technology of electronic communication is embedded, we at one and the same time marginalise and compromise the value of face to face interchange. 'The more that the use of computers is demanded of us, the more we shall be taken away from truly deep human experiences. That does not mean you should never spend time at a computer screen. Nor does it mean that if you spend time at a computer, you will never have

any deep human experiences. It just means that current developments tend to put pressure on people to live less humane lives' (Lakoff, 1995:124). This being so, our reliance upon computechnology and its various modes of communication eg. mobile phones, video games, and internet transactions, become ever more embedded and taken for granted and thus socially ubiquitous, without any philosophical reflection on why this should occur. Should we not be asking whether our resolute commitment to computer-based learning serves unwittingly to devalue the qualitative experience of our children's education by increasingly substituting face to face classroom interchanges with mechanically mediated informational transmissions characterised primarily by the processing of data? Is it not worth considering that the more time we encourage schoolchildren to spend in the isolated context of the computer screen, the less time they spend interacting with their teachers learning how to interact with them and others to form bonds of trust and loyalty. Should we not be concerned philosophically that the pedagogy of computopia may in the end serve inadvertently to propagate contexts for depersonalisation not only in schools, but also in both the workplace and the wider community in general? (Laura & Marchant, 2002: 95)

Computechnology and Dehumanisation

One significant facet of the depersonalization associated with computechnology is well illustrated in the paradox that as a culture, we have developed metaphorical idioms for personalising and anthropomorphising our computers, while we depersonalise humans by speaking about them as if they were machines. This way of speaking is by its very nature dehumanising. If a computer is not fully functional, it is not uncommon for the user to rationalize and 'forgive' its dysfunctionality by anthropomorphizing its mechanical functions as if they were human forms of behaviour. It is not unusual, for example, to hear a user excusing his/her computer by saying that the computer has a virus, is not warmed up or, is just understandably 'slow', 'lazy' or 'on strike' because it is still early on a Monday morning. We accept the shortcomings of the machines by speaking in a way which makes it seem as if their faults were human. The rub is that we all too often expect humans to behave as if they were machines and respond unforgivingly when they do not. In a tone of remonstrance for a job not so well done, for instance, we create idioms such as, 'get with the program', 'get your engine running' or 'it's time you plugged in'. On the other hand, we

often compliment someone who works particularly hard by ascribing accolades associated with our conventional descriptions of machines. In this context it is not uncommon for a person's hard work, (manual, intellectual or otherwise) to be complimented by using mechanistic metaphors (eg. 'He works like a machine', 'his engine never stops running' or 'she clearly got with the program'. In the foregoing cases the issue of depersonalization is conflated with dehumanisation, since the expectation is that the value of a human being can be judged without moral impropriety by assessing the work a human can do against a well-functioning machine.

The Loss of Face: The Human Face

That computechnology has facilitated and proliferated the forms of communication now available to us is incontestable. It is salutary to remind ourselves, however, that the more forms of communication we increasingly embed to expand the culture of computechnology, the increasingly less intimate and depersonalized the face to face human interactions become that they were designed to replace. Simply put, the argument advanced here affirms that the depersonalization of human relationships and the dehumanization which follows from it are an inevitable consequence of universalising the highly mechanised modes of communication which characterise computechnology. Compuphilia thus comes to represent a socially legitimated syndrome which implicitly encourages the love of computers, without adequately understanding the extent to which their universality is by its very nature a threat to the love we have for humans. This is why we tend to anthromophormise our machines while dehumanising each other. These contrary dispositions give rise to serious moral issues which have been neglected. For example, humans are expected by their employers – or we demand it of ourselves – to work at our computers, not only throughout the day but sometimes tirelessly into the night. One promise of computopia was to give us all, even school children, more leisure time, but the truth is that if we have more leisure time, we all too often spend it working or 'playing' at the computer in *virtual isolation.* I-Pods are just another symptom of this growing trend towards 'technological isolationism'. It is well worth noting that to date insufficient attention has been paid to the deleterious physical and mental effects of these new forms of social isolation.

Because we spend progressively more time communicating through or working in isolation at our computers, we tend not to notice that we

are spending less time, and certainly *less quality time* with each other. Within such technologically structured contexts of learning the potential for creating deep and bonding relationships between teachers and students is decidedly diminished. Potentially intimate and vital personal relationships are in essence being channelled without any overt social concern into impersonal one dimensional, mechanistically mediated interactions. We have, in effect, slipped almost imperceptibly into a new culture of human relationships which structurally encourage the substitution of face to face forms of human interchange with technologically mediated forms of communication, even when face-to-face communication is available.   ,

When we start to treat each other increasingly like machines and our machines more and more like humans, it is surely time to rethink the nature of our relationships with each other and to redefine our commitment to computechnology, especially as it affects us educationally. When people young and old, log-on to distant relationships mediated through computer cyber-space, the illusion is fostered that these relationships are comprehensive and deep, when in fact they are only a one dimensional slice of a multi dimensional form of human interaction. Loyal friendships and loving relationships depend upon bonds of understanding, trust and intimacy, few, if any of which can be satisfactorily provided by a single 'facet – experience' of a multi-faceted person.

Given western society's commitment to electronic technology, it all too frequently goes unnoticed that we have come to rely increasingly less upon face to face contact. Because we are able to converse over the telephone, we often choose not to meet people in person, even when we can. Indeed, we often use our answering machines to screen calls from both loved and unloved ones, just as many would rather text than make a call. Put simply, 'conversations' take place but they are increasingly no more than conversations with far removed or absent others. Because it is easier to communicate with people at a distance, we feel less compunction in distancing ourselves from them. The distance we create, encourage or tolerate, represents a form of depersonalisation and dehumanisation which gives rise to personal alienation and social isolation. 'Whilst the internal workings of a child's mind remains shrouded in some mystery, it is palpably clear that protracted periods of social isolation do little to encourage a child's overall development' (Laura & Marchant, 2002: 113).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to reflect upon the impact which computechnology has had and is having on interpersonal relationships. The central concern has been to tease out some of the neglected implications of the computer revolution, as they relate to the domain of education in particular, and society in general. Clearly computer technology can serve to facilitate communication with others who are remote from us, whether the medium of contact is undertaken by way of e-mail, video conferencing, teleconferencing, on-line banking, home shopping, electronic voting or telecommuting.

Notwithstanding these benefits, the potential for integrated well-being and the forming of deep and trusting relationships between teachers and students, so integral a factor in educational outcomes, is being jeopardised by the increasing reliance on computechnology as the predominant medium within which education is administered and mediated at virtually every level of teaching. A central concern of this essay has been to show that such electronic technologies become dehumanising and depersonalising when the relationships they simulate are substituted for the face to face modes of human contact and interchange. This holds true in the educational context as it does in society generally. We argue that the much applauded technologisation of the modern world is leading ineluctably to the depersonalisation of fundamentally intimate aspects of human relations. By legitimizing the culture of computechnological communication, we implicitly encourage the progressive substitution of technological innovation for forms of interchange characterised by the physical presence of another human. Not only do we now mediate our natural experiences of human relationships via mechanistic interactions, but we have technologised our lives in such a way that it is becoming ever more difficult to conduct the vast array of human communications in any other way. This is the lamentable legacy of compuphilia.

Computechnology may have a salient role to play in education but compuphilia serves inadvertently to weaken the unions of loyalty, commitment and trust between teachers and students which would otherwise enhance educational achievement and student satisfaction. The bonds of loyalty and trust, stemming from genuinely intimate relationships are essential elements in the dynamics of all human relationships, but they are absolutely critical to loving and truly creative relationships. Technology has made electronic modes of communication increasingly accessible to everyone, but the forms of communication upon which we now progressively depend are themselves for the most

part decreasingly intimate. The ensuing loss of intimacy alters the nature of education irrevocably, and not necessarily for the best.

Having surrounded ourselves with machines, and having now brought the computer into our homes and schools, technology has itself become a value which we use as a measure of the worth of the world around us. The substitution of technological innovation for the phenomenon of human interchange represents a deep wound to the human spirit. We also become caught in the web of a bizarre moral ambiguity. *We still claim we value people, but we are not entirely certain what we value them for.* Within the context of this moral ambiguity, it is difficult to see how the relationship of bonding between students and teachers, so critical to educational outcomes, can be maximally fostered.

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