

Education, Technology, and the Human Spirit
Creating a Vision Worth Working Toward
INTRODUCTION

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December 11, 2002

EXCUSE AND MEANS – NEW CHOICES

Information technology can be the excuse and the means to new goals, new accomplishments and new visions in education. As we see more clearly that education is changing in response to new technology options, we also see that we must make choices. Will we allow technology to change education and to change us – in ways that we do not predict and may not prefer? Or will we make decisions and commitments to use technology to enable the kinds of change that matter most to us? This must be the right time to begin, for surely it is not yet too late. And equally surely, the sooner we begin the sooner we can achieve something new and better together. Even small steps in the right direction can make a difference.

Many of us hope and believe that through many kinds of education we can help more human beings achieve more meaningful, fulfilling, and useful lives; and that through new technologies, we can make those kinds of education more available.

NEED NEW LANGUAGE AND NEW FORUM FOR NEW VISIONS

In many institutions there is neither forum nor language for discussing how education, technology, and the human spirit might relate to each other. In fact, many have difficulty with just the idea of integrating education and new technology options. Many more are uncomfortable raising issues about “the human spirit” within their roles as education professionals. Trying to relate all three elements – education, technology, and the human spirit -- to each other and to integrate them in a new vision is a difficult and crucial new challenge.

“Education, technology, and the human spirit” is a phrase that captures important parts of this challenge. The phrase is confusing to those who fear that the three elements cannot fit together well at all. They see technology as an irreversible force driving education to become ever more mechanistic, impersonal, and divorced from important community and societal values.

Others see technology as potentially supporting education that can be more individualized, personal, and nurturing of communities and of the human spirit. They may recognize this phrase as a doorway into a new place – a place where we want to go, a place where we can continue building something worthwhile together.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? TIME TO CHANGE

What does the phrase mean to you?

I don't have a complete understanding of the phrase yet myself, but I am increasingly comfortable using it. It captures the heart of my work for the past three decades.

Of course, while the terms “education,” and “technology,” are notoriously difficult to define; “the human spirit” may be even more challenging and the source of even greater discomfort among higher education professionals – except, perhaps, at institutions that have a strong public commitment to a particular religious tradition.

There are many who seek to understand and improve the human conditions that can be found intertwined with any educational activity. And there are those who recognize and seek to improve the spiritual dimension of any educational activity – the dimension that may be deeply hidden, actively denied, or set aside as irrelevant or inappropriate. Many of the people making these efforts rarely talk to each other or even acknowledge each others' existence, legitimacy, achievements, and goals. It is time to change that. We hope to provide opportunities for people to reveal, clarify, and test their ideas in this area. We hope to help clarify some of the terminology and language and to enable people to disagree openly with each other within a framework of discourse that is recognized as appropriate, legitimate, healthy and helpful.

MANY KINDS OF EDUCATION

[See: Personalizing Pedagogy at: <<http://www.tltgroup.org/PersonalizingPedagogy/Home.htm>>]. There are many kinds of education, many kinds of learners, and many kinds of good teaching and good teachers. I respect most of them, including those that focus only on passing along specific skills and information. But, especially in the past few years, I have found many people sharing my growing belief that we can achieve something more in and through education. I'm ready to give more of my time and effort to the kinds of teaching and learning that honor the human spirit. I believe that many others are, too. I also believe that many thousands of teachers in schools, colleges, and universities have already been doing so for many years. Often indirectly, and usually without much acknowledgment or fanfare, teachers try to nurture some of the most admirable human characteristics to be found in learners.

HARD TIMES – NEW VISIONS

In many ways these are hard times. Hard for our educational institutions, hard for the people within them, hard for our country, and even harder in other parts of the world. I believe more people are thirsting for something we can do, something more profound than only seeking relief from increasing insecurity.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of attractive technology options for education can easily distract us from these considerations. The increasing financial, demographic, and political pressures to provide more and better education to more and more people, also make it difficult for many involved in higher education to focus on the fundamental reasons they pursued these careers.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

During the past seven years I have helped hundreds of groups consider the following two fundamental questions as they contemplate changes precipitated by new options for using information technology in teaching and learning:

1. What do you most want to gain?

For yourself? For your colleagues? For your students? For your institution?

2. What do you most cherish and want not to lose?

For yourself? For your colleagues? For your students? For your institution?

The responses to these questions often help participants articulate more clearly their own educational goals.

Even when these questions were asked in a clearly professional context, many of the answers and the ensuing discussions became quite personal. However, I believe we may find these questions even more stimulating when asked in a context that strongly encourages participants to consider not only their professional goals, but also their deeper personal aspirations. I expect that in these new conversations we will understand much better what people mean by the “human spirit.” As that becomes clearer, I hope it will also become more influential.

[For additional Fundamental Questions and related Queries, see:

<http://www.tltgroup.org/Queries/7FundamentalQuestions10-10-01.htm>

and

<http://www.tltgroup.org/Queries/Connected.htm>]