

What the Cursor Said

By Cynthia James

We acknowledge the benefits of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and the need to train educators in their use. We understand the need for technical support and maintenance; and surely, in spite of our alleged “third world” consumer status, we are no longer buying cat in bag. Having suffered dumping for decades, we have developed savvy about getting the best buys in an industry noted for its quick obsolescence. As sensible people, too, our conversations have gone past fears of technology replacing the teacher.

What I am not so sure that educators fully appreciate, though, is that having ICTs and being proficient in their use does not translate automatically into enhanced learning. For I am seeing a lot of cooler rooms with students in cardigans, eyes trained on a show taking place up front. What, may I ask, is the difference between conventional chalk and talk and such a scenario? Regardless of how adept educators become at using the cursor, or the laser pointer, it can indeed become no different from a stick of chalk; the screen can become just a hyped-up, overloaded blackboard; and the space between the students’ desks and the projector can remain the un-crossable teacher’s threshold as much as it ever was. Worse yet, I have an aunt who uses her TV like Nyquil, and a baby who, in a glow of images and the illusion of adult company, falls asleep in the arms of the world.

I am not scoffing at the benefits of ICT in distance education or teleconferencing. Greater numbers can be served. Neither am I scoffing at the power of hypertext to link to myriad pages to deepen research, nor at the saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. All I am suggesting is that we understand the different purposes of ICT in various educational scenarios and that we not lump them all together.

While ICT may enhance the teacher’s research, preparation, effectiveness at illustration, and the amount he can cover in a session, it may merely present the average student with voluminous overload. Without the equipment to do the inquiry-based learning, the student may even be more passive than in the traditional classroom.

I say this because, apart from the teacher’s console, I am not seeing too many student ICT stations in classrooms. Electronic learning centres are still largely in labs, with limited rotational access. In some schools, so tight is the roster that students may get to use ICT once a week, and not for schoolwork. In some subjects, such as English, never at all! And this, when the architecture surrounding the installation of ICT is not insurmountable. New designs place computers behind glass-panelled desktops that allow full desk surface, around which groups of students can work. These are the models that we must invest in; models that put cursors under learners’ palms, so that they can help make their own knowledge instead of being stargazers at teacher-experts.

Let us be alert to the psychology of ICT. Of course, some learning scenarios will require all students in a class to have one focal point. But let us not lump them all. Otherwise, however fancy the show, it would be little different from chalk and talk. In fact it could

be worse. For if the teacher joins in the watching of his shows, he doesn't even need to bother to learn to talk. As the cursor said to the stick of chalk: "Power your point, and become a fancy toy."

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