

Technological Citizenship

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The potential influence of technology on the education system has not gone unnoticed by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 2003, the MOE devised a new National Curriculum with technology education being one of the key subjects. The goal of technology education is to teach students how to use or operate particular tools of technology and to function in a technological environment. The MOE's intention is to bring about the development of a creative and innovative citizen who will be involved in the technology of the day. However, educating our students about technology should go further. It should also serve to prepare them to be morally responsible citizens capable of making decisions about technology in society. However, this ideal of technological citizenship does not appear to be immediately realisable.

Studies in environmental psychology have stressed that interactive transactions between individuals and their physical settings can affect and change their behaviour and experiences. As our students begin to interact with and become heavy consumers of technology, many parents and teachers are observing how the technology is affecting the way they function in our society. Firstly, many technological applications in today's society have become increasingly personalised. Such personalised devices include cell phones, MP3/DVD players, iPods, Sony PSPs, and Nintendo DS to name a few. Students tend to become unwittingly "selfish" as these devices allow them to selectively 'tune in' to their personal infozone and 'tune out' everything and everyone else they deem irrelevant by their standards.

Further, the rapid convergence of information services, entertainment, software, and telecommunications is occurring on the ubiquitous cell phone. Aided by the recent liberalisation of our telecommunications sector, once expensive cell phones are now affordable and are targeted to the youth as status symbols. Much to the chagrin of educators and parents, the school environment has been unexpectedly inundated by a tsunami of cell phones. Although many individuals and organisations (including the MOE) have commented on this transformation of the school environment, officials are still struggling to effectively deal with this technology wave.

Secondly, our students are becoming slavishly addictive to online networks that are socially interactive. With English being the de facto language of the Internet, students tend to boldly go and seek out preferred communities in networks, not groups. Linton Freeman, in the *American Journal of Sociology*, states that although people often tend to view the world in terms of communal groups, they actually function in social networks. This change from groups to networks is already transforming cyberspace into cyberplaces, namely, communities characterised by personalised networking through email, chat rooms, and instant messaging.

Further, the accelerated increase in interactive videogaming/edutainment has already set the stage for conversational interfaces that are more compelling and educational to students than any paper-based learning material, no matter how professionally produced. Interactive interfaces are seen as the leading cause of Internet addiction. Through these cyberplaces, students renew and sustain their community ties, access selective information, and find a sense of belonging,

meaningful support, and social identity.

Another key feature of these cyberplaces is the use of anonymous technology to create the illusionary reality of a digital persona or an avatar (derived from the Sanskrit word *Avatara*, meaning incarnation). These avatars can serve as alternate personalities for engaging in illicit activities, such as students downloading images related to cell-phone pornography in schools. As Professor Lawrence Lessig of Stanford Law School has shown that the Internet's architecture constrains and governs a person's behaviour as well as the way they interact with other persons in society.

Clearly, students' behaviour patterns are inconsistent with Feuerstein and Hoffman's traditional view of education as transmitting the skills that are socially and economically useful for students to become responsible, thoughtful, and enterprising citizens. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of discernment by the MOE of the profound and pervasive impact technologies are having on students' lives outside the school environment and in the wider society. Too often, our formal education focuses on academic and technical subjects, and neglects the practice of citizenship. Citizenship expresses a social role, which includes issues of belonging, identity, and inclusiveness. We should, however, consider the 1998 *Crick Report*, emanating from the UK Government's Department for Education and Skills, which recommends the introduction of citizenship as a National Curriculum subject. 'Citizenship studies' involves students learning "social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy."

But this is not enough. If we are to prepare our students to live in an uncertain future, the MOE needs to implement the ideals and practices of technological citizenship. This would prepare our students to be morally responsible citizens, able to make decisions about the technology already shaping our nation's future rather than merely reacting to it as passive consumers. Our society's future depends on how well we inculcate these values of technological citizenship in our students.

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