Competition


In the United States, President Bush is promoting competition among schools for student enrollment. He is using the argument that if parents have an increased number of choices of which school their children will attend, this will lead to improvements in schools. This is somewhat analogous to customers being able to select which grocery store they will use. The better store will get the most customers, forcing other stores to change or go out of business.

Choice of school is an important issue. Its importance is increasing due to the growth in "magnet" schools, corporate non-profit or for-profit schools, and home schooling. However, for most parents/students the number of schools that are conveniently available is quite limited, and there is limited variability in the schools that are available.

Fortunately, there is a different type of competition that is rapidly entering our educational system. It is being provided by distance education and computer-assisted learning (CAL).

Multimedia Delivery Systems (MDS)

The history of distance education is rooted in correspondence courses where the interaction between student and teacher was via print materials delivered by mail. However, steady improvements in telecommunications and electronic technologies have gradually changed distance education. Now distance education may incorporate two-way audio and one-way or two-way video, perhaps supplemented by print materials and videotape.

The history of computer-assisted learning is rooted in programmed texts. Such programmed texts are a far cry from today's interactive, multimedia CAL systems. The breadth and depth of CAL-based curriculum materials, including whole courses, is rapidly increasing. Progress in artificial intelligence is contributing to improving the quality of CAL.

It is clear that distance education and CAL are now closely related. For convenience in this editorial, we will call any combination of distance education and/or CAL a Multimedia Delivery System (MDS).

MDS allows a more "fine tuned" type of competition than does choice of school. Through MDS, an individual student can have increased options both as to what courses are available and how and when they are taught.

MDS for Students

It is clear that one goal of education is to help students learn to learn and to become lifelong learners. MDS will provide the individual student with a wider range of choices of what to learn, when to learn it, and what assistance is available in the learning process. It is not difficult to imagine that eventually every subject a student might want to study would be available in an MDS mode and at an instructional level appropriate to the student. Thus, it seems clear that one major thrust of education should be to help students learn to make use of MDS. Each student should learn what is available through MDS and how well they can use MDS to help themselves learn.
MDS and Teachers

In an earlier editorial in this series, I discussed mimetic and transformative approaches to education. MDS developers are aware of these two approaches. Some are developing systems that strongly support a mimetic approach to education. We see such use of MDS in the videodisc-equipped classroom where the teacher holds the hand controller and steps students through an instructional sequence. All students cover the same materials at the same pace, and the teacher is fully in charge.

However, it is also clear that MDS can bring a new dimension to a transformative educational system. Students can learn what is available through MDS and how they, personally, can most effectively make use of MDS. As students progress in the transformative educational system, they have the added choice of MDS as an aid to learning. We see such use of MDS as groups of students, perhaps located at widely varying locations throughout the world, work together to learn material being presented via distance education. We see this in a school as a group of students work together, and then one or more of the students make use of CAL to study ideas that have arisen in the group activities.

MDS brings a new type of competition into education. It is a competition between the individual teachers in a school building and MDS as an instructional delivery system. Some teachers will find this quite threatening, while others will find that appropriate use of MDS helps them to better facilitate the learning of their students.

Recommendation

Research on school improvement and change strongly points out that both students and teachers resist change. Students want to be taught in the way they have been taught in the past, and teachers tend to teach in the way that they were taught. Both will need help in learning to take advantage of the added choices that MDS bring.

It is clear that MDS can be incorporated into conventional public and private schools, magnet schools, corporate schools, and home schooling. If MDS receives appropriate financial support at state and national levels, it can greatly increase the learning opportunities available to students in impoverished schools. Appropriate use of MDS can empower the individual learner. Thus, school restructuring must pay careful attention to MDS.