Letter to Teachers


Dear Teacher:

Being a teacher is a challenge even in the best of times. It is doubly difficult now, with tight budgets, increasing expectations, and very rapid changes going on in our society. These difficulties are compounded by the continued rapid progress of technology. Computers lie at the heart of much of this technological change, but our educational system is not doing very well in dealing with computer-related technology. In two previous letters I addressed what students and parents could do about this problem. Future letters will be addressed to curriculum coordinators, educational policy makers, and politicians. This letter focuses on teachers.

Have you ever wondered what it must have been like to be a teacher when reading, writing, and arithmetic were being invented? Surely this must have been a major challenge; it is not easy to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic. However, these skills have proven to be nearly indispensable aids to the human brain, and schools eventually adopted the goal of helping every student to master them. Methods were developed for the mass production of books, pencils, and paper so that all students and teachers could have easy access to these tools. Now, every teacher is expected to be reasonably proficient in the “basics” of education—reading, writing, and arithmetic. These educational changes occurred over a period of several thousand years.

These ideas closely parallel what is now going on with computers. Like reading, writing, and arithmetic, computers are a powerful aid to the human mind. Computers are also a powerful aid to instruction, and teachers are having to cope with computers. However, the time frame for this change is not millennia, but a single teaching career.

Here is a simple two-question self-test you can use to see how well you are coping with technology.

1. Do your students learn to make effective use of computers as an aid to exploration and to solving the problems that occur within the disciplines you teach? That is, are your students empowered by computers? (If your students routinely use multimedia, hypermedia, and computers, and if they are routinely evaluated in an environment that includes these tools, then your answer is “yes.”)

2. Do you and your students make appropriate use of computers as an aid to teaching/learning the disciplines you teach? Specifically, are you empowered by computers?

If you answer “no” to either of these questions, you are letting your students down. The many reasons and excuses for “no” answers can be divided into two major categories. The first might be labeled, “It’s someone else’s fault.” In this category we place excuses such as not having enough computers and appropriate curriculum materials, and not receiving enough staff
development from the school district. The second category might be labeled, “It’s my fault. I could do it if I would set my mind to the task, but ...”

Such fault-finding does not focus on the major issue. Many of our students are not learning to make effective use of computers as an aid to problem solving. They are not learning that computers are now inexorably woven into the very fabric of every academic discipline. Moreover, they do not routinely make use of computers as an aid to learning, even in situations where there is substantial evidence students would benefit greatly from such use.

There are two things you can do about this. First, exert pressure on your school administrators, school board, union, and school funding structure to work toward overcoming the first set of excuses. Enlist the aid of students and parents in this endeavor. A small group of students, parents, and teachers can produce a major change in a school system.

Second, you can accept the fact that you have a deep professional responsibility to become computer competent, that you owe it to your students to help them learn to make effective use of computers as an aid to problem solving and learning. You can begin immediately to fulfill this responsibility, and learn by doing.

Our educational system is at a major turning point, and you are a key player in the changes that are occurring. I challenge you, as a professional educator, to take a leadership role. Please write to me and share what you are doing.

Sincerely yours,