Art Education and New Technology: Are You Ready?

Susan Witwicki

I don't think I'm ready…

As an Art education major, I was somewhat daunted by a recent job offer requiring me to teach in the Career and Technology Studies department. As a recovering technophobe and lover of scissors and paste, I was cautious of this 'Brave New World' of computers. I perceived post-millennial teens to be cyber savvy know-it-alls, largely due to the way in which they were portrayed in the media. As well, if the ads were true, teens weren't the only ones riding the new technological wave; Cisco Systems 1999 television campaign presented a global Utopia of citizens united through surfing the net. Shot in a series of exotic locales, the Cisco ads featured various cultural ambassadors garbed in ethnic dress asking the western TV audience "Are you ready?" Ready for what, you ask? Well, the *Internet*, of course! Cisco shows us a (fake?) Greek grandma tending her flock of sheep and *she's* asking *you* if *you're* ready for the new information age! Get with it, dude! If Mongolian nomads were hip to on-line education and instant messaging, I could only imagine the dizzying cyber heights being reached by upper middle class teens in Canada!

Are We Ready?

Well, after six months teaching Web Design and Computer Applications to grade 10 students, I can positively say that the Cisco ads were more than a bit misleading. While I find the ads offensive for their superficial and saccharine vision of the 'techno-global village', Brian O'Neill, chief creative officer of Cisco's ad agency, insists, "becoming a brand that is shaped by humility and humanity is critical." [1] Despite my cynicism, I can partially buy into O'Neill's view; not the branding stuff, but the part about humility and humanity. As an art educator, this was my 'in'. As well, my teaching colleagues had assured me that classroom routines and management were key; an expert-level understanding of computers would not guarantee student success. (A case in point: a close friend of mine is currently enrolled in a beginner level computer course. She cannot count on assistance, however, from her Web designer husband, who becomes frustrated when she needs him to 'dumb down' and explain simple concepts at a beginner level. He is an expert, but not a teacher.)

The kids are ready…

Nonetheless, I was intimidated by the high degree of student bravado. In support of my preconceptions, many individual students gave me the impression that they already knew everything there was to know about computers. (Somehow, I doubt this would ever happen in a Social Studies classroom, where the 'cool' factor is significantly lower). However, while most of my students had grown up with computers, they were not accustomed to thinking about the potential risks and hazards. For instance, many students were incredulous when I began the course with a lesson on Internet safety and privacy. The National Film Board's "Caught in the Net", a film about the potential for deceit in online relationships, was openly mocked by the class for its attempt to encourage youth to use caution and critical thinking while surfing the net. Admittedly, the film was a little clunky and preachy, but the issues

remain significant; on-line acquaintances may misrepresent themselves and online information must always be scrutinised.

After this brief discussion of online issues, we began the hands-on portion of the course. Most students seemed to be very comfortable on the keyboard and compulsively clicked and jerked the mouse with confidence. Assigned tasks were completed quickly. In fact, many students were completing projects *too quickly* and when I marked their introductory activities, I realised that much of the work was only partially done. Frequently, specific instructions had been overlooked, files were missing or incorrectly named and entire assignments were improperly submitted. It became apparent that my students were equating speed with quality. I venture to guess that the need for speed was reinforced by exposure to instant messaging and online chatting services. Some students actually complained that e-mail was too slow for their liking. But while communicating in 'real time' was preferred, it demanded extra speedy typing skills. Out of this on-line frenzy of chatting emerged a kind of shorthand script; a language of creatively ordered characters, numbers and symbols that approximated both English phrases and human expressions: B4N (Bye For Now), BRB (Be Right Back), LOL (Laugh Out Loud), the more intense ROFL (Rolling on Floor Laughing), L8R (Later) and GR8 (Great). Students also enjoyed using and creating *emoticons* that communicated facial expressions and body language:

>:-(Angry
:(Frown
(((((name)))) Hug (cyber hug)
:O   Shocked
:)   Smile
;)   Wink

Are We Ready?

While some of these symbols and codes demonstrate the kind of economic creativity that is required by real time chatting, they also raise some interesting questions about the changing nature of language and communication. While language relies on the use of conventions, these keyboard shortcuts reduce communication to a generic set of expressions understood by all frequent chatters.

As a result, the kind of online chatting enjoyed by my students largely consisted of snappy and superficial one-liners. As well, the brevity of such expressions eliminates the need to construct sentences that express uniquely personal feelings and opinions. If these shortcuts begin to interfere with a student's ability to articulate original ideas and compose paragraphs using a pen and paper, then parents and educators must begin to consider the long-term effects of online chatting. Lowercase letters are also predominant in on-line communications and, as a result, the rules of capitalisation are increasingly ignored in student work.

While on-line chatting and instant messaging were popular computer applications, students were also involved in game playing and sharing music files. Based on informal observation, it appeared that on-line activities were somewhat divided along gender lines, with girls preferring to chat and boys preferring to play games. What soon became obvious was that my students used computers largely for entertainment and social purposes. This really should not be so surprising, as such activities, in some form or another, are often sought out by teenagers.

In a classroom situation, however, the exciting distractions offered up by the Internet often proved to be too tempting and resulted in a kind of technological attention deficit disorder. Many of the most boastful, competitive students would rush through their assignments so that they

could 'get on with' chatting, downloading music, and checking out the hottest new games, as if computers *really* had been developed for these more fun activities. While many of my students were capable of using a computer to entertain themselves, they were not able necessarily to use a computer to create quality projects. Simply using technology and using it *well* are two different matters.

The whole world is ready (or is it?)

Many of the more zealous proponents of computer education often overlook this important fact, while those who make even cautious criticisms of computer use in schools risk being labelled as Luddites. Nonetheless, educators must be prepared to examine the widely held assumption that computers are benign and essential in today's schools. In fact, the uncritical acceptance of computers as a great educational panacea in an era of globalization acts to reinforce the very values that threaten the health of the planet. New technologies are transformed into highly charged status symbols that eventually become essential household items. (For example, in the early days of the personal computer, only a handful of my friends had computers in the home and, indeed, families were not automatically expected to own a PC. In the last 20 years, however, it has become more unusual *not* to have a computer in the home)

Western consumer society has accepted the cycle of spending and upgrading that comes with planned obsolescence and we are taught that we cannot function without the newest and fastest products. VCRs are currently making their exit from the technological life cycle, therefore, forcing consumers to purchase DVD players. Few pause to realise that as last year's gadgets are tossed aside and new ones are purchased, enormous sums of money and resources are wasted, all while millions

of the world's people remain illiterate. The commonly held belief that North American children need to have access to computers so that they can be 'globally competitive' does not acknowledge such problems as resource distribution and disparity. In a neoliberal climate of reduced social spending, how can public schools afford to keep up with institutionalised techno-turnover? The United States Department of Education recommends a student/computer ratio of 5:1, while most schools struggle to meet a ratio of 21:1. Some schools have resorted to forging school/industry 'partnerships' to gain access to extra resources. We cannot forget, however, that there are enormous profits to be made by computer manufacturers, software companies and Internet providers, so these arrangements are far from neutral. As well, the industry is not above resorting to guilt-inducing advertisements to convince caring parents that their children will not be able to succeed in life without high-speed home Internet access.

In a radio advertisement a couple of summers back, a local Internet provider had featured a whining gender-neutral child complaining to her/his parents about how unless s/he had high speed internet s/he would have fewer opportunities in life and would end up working for her/his more privileged neighbourhood pals one day. The ad's "keeping-up-with-the-Jounces" approach attempted to spawn sales through appealing to parental shame and fear; the advertisement's core message is "Get high speed Internet or else your kid will end up as a loser." What if a family cannot afford a computer and the monthly bills that come with Internet use? Do these parents care less about their child's future? The message misleads and manipulates listeners by granting the Internet a disproportionate amount of credit for being able to guarantee a child's future success in life, which is defined solely in terms of job status.

Having taught Web design to a group of teens, I can attest that high-speed access and fancy gadgets *in no way guarantee academic excellence*. Parents and educators who have been convinced to believe otherwise are guilty of a dangerously superficial kind of technophilia that derives pleasure from computer technology in and of itself. In *Technopoly*, Neil Postman describes schools as

one of our primary means of socialising the young into technology, a culture that subjugates people to the interests of technology, and elevates that pursuit of quality of information over meaning, and divorces that population from the belief systems, as information management has no moral core.[2]

The seemingly dry world of information studies can drive away some of the 'artsier' students and discourage teachers in the liberal arts from collaborating with those in the computer technology department, as I witnessed firsthand. As one of the 'artsier' ones in my department, I felt that I could see both the potential and great need for an approach to computer education that goes beyond techno-fetish. Just as a kitchen full of the latest gadgets and best ingredients do not transform Suzy or Stevie Homemaker into a great chef, the latest technology does not bestow brilliance upon the user. In the kitchen, one must develop a 'feel' for flavours and textures, timing and touch. Likewise, in addition to technical know-how, Web design requires a 'feel' for design, organisation, appropriateness, communication and ease of use. As a teacher, I had a difficult task: I had to convince my students that their favourite toy was also a powerful and complex tool.

Are We Ready?

As an art educator, the most natural approach to Web design concentrated on design and composition. That is, rather than stressing technical wizardry for its own sake, I would present Web design as a creative form of communication. I did this by concentrating on elements of layout, text, font faces and the use of colour, as well as the overall purpose and logic of the project. Projects should look good, be well organised and include meaningful content, in addition to properly functioning when viewed on the Web. Surprisingly, some if the most technically advanced students had the most difficulty with this design approach; techno-snobbery did not always correlate with high quality products. Some of the more technologically advanced students rushed through projects and completed the bare minimum requirements. I often discovered these students playing online games or checking their e-mail after hurriedly submitting their work. On the other hand, there were students with less computer experience who readily learned the basic technical skills and spent much of their time developing highly creative projects. I was continually surprised by such outcomes and I feel that I learned a tremendous amount about young people and technology while teaching this course.

During this time, I was also influenced by the work of Ernest N. Savage, who spoke at the Edmonton Public School Teachers Convention in February 2002. Throughout his presentation "Don't Forget the Soft Stuff", Savage argued that technology is replacing the need for students to think independently and that the lack of education about the origins, content and impact of new technologies is contributing to a society of semi-literate automatons. Savage calls for more cross-curricular treatment of computer technology and asks educators to resist being "seduced" by gimmicky new machines. Instead, educators must show students *how to think about* computers rather than simply how to operate them. Art teachers can probably attest to this quite easily; the most expensive paintbrushes don't teach a student *how* to paint. A great painter can create beauty using twigs and toothpicks in place of

brushes because she understands *how to paint*. Computer technology is a tool and is only as effective as the skills of the person using it. These aspects of technology education can no longer remain invisible and must be integrated into the curriculum so that students can benefit from computers and learn to use them thoughtfully and responsibly.

In my own free time, I have enjoyed making collages both with and without computers. However, I find that the limitless possibilities of creating computer-assisted art are, paradoxically, stifling. With so many possible ways to create and compose, using software such as PhotoShop or Flash, I begin to feel overwhelmed and my creativity dries up. Somehow, sitting on the floor with a stack of old magazines, scissors and glue is still more satisfying. I am continually more excited and surprised by the outcomes of my projects when I work with hard copies. The obvious advantages to using design software is the opportunity to edit for various effects and produce a 'slick', polished final product. Sometimes, this helps to achieve the desired look. (I have included two images in this regard.) Other times, this results in a final piece that lacks charm; smudges and bumps and uneven surfaces have their advantages, too. While teaching our students about computers, we mustn't forget about the 'soft stuff', as Savage puts it.   Without it, computers serve us very little and can actually spawn additional problems. Technology means 'tool'; a sharp rock is a tool and can be used as a weapon. It can also be used to help build a shelter or prepare food; it's the users choice. Computers are like this, too.

Are We Ready?

References

1. *USA Today,* http://www.usatoday.com/money/index/ad297. htm (October 22, 2002).

2. Barlow, Maude and Heather-Jane Robertson. *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools* (Toronto, Ont.: Key Porter, 1994).