

## E-LEARNING AND METAPHORES

*"As long as schools confine the technology to simply improving what they are doing rather than really changing the system, nothing very significant will happen"*

Technology in Schools: Seymour Papert

I am interested in metaphors: we understand the world through them – thunder is an angry god; the universe is like a big watch, light is like a wave (or is it like a pulse of energy?). Sometimes new information breaks the metaphor and we pass into a new one as we grope our way forward: Einstein's atomic clock is not the same as Newton's mechanical one.

A Quantum world in which an electron can spin in two directions at the same time should require some serious rethinking about our Aristotelian world model.

Metaphors affect our attitude towards things and how we treat them; if we think a child is like a blank slate to be written on we treat him differently to if we think he is a tree to be nourished.

The metaphor of a learning structure that I see used most frequently is that of building a wall (or perhaps, to avoid negative connotations, I should say constructing a building): we know what the finished product is to be. We have a plan, we put down the foundations and we put one brick on another until we achieve the result. But *is* this how learning takes place?

We do not learn grammar before we learn to speak and I did not learn all the skills that allow me to windsurf one after another: it was more like creating a jigsaw puzzle, putting clues and approximations together until I had a picture.

It is interesting to ask why certain very brilliant students frustrate, and are frustrated by, school. I think that it is because they do not learn in the way that they are *supposed* to- in fact they learn in a way that is neither linear nor contained. I have actually heard teachers complain because a student was using a program before he was taught it!

We seem to be approaching E-learning as with the same old 19<sup>th</sup> century model that has dominated schooling throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We are using new means to do the same old thing. Seymour Papert says it is as if someone invented the jet engine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and attached it to a horse and carriage to make it go faster and no one could even imagine the concept of a plane.

What *would* an airplane be in educational terms?

Perhaps there would be no school: no teachers in the current sense of the term.

Learning would become really student centered, rather than teacher centered.

The distinction between learner and teacher becomes blurred:

*"We no longer have a learning environment in which teachers-who-know hand out knowledge to students-who-know-not"*

The line between home learning, school-learning and work would become blurred.

It would be like Napster: democratic, user based; a little chaotic, fun and always growing. It would be organic:

Contemporary management theory emphasizes the success of "organic" structures: 'flat' (non-hierarchical) small, flexible, decentralized and dynamic, autonomous groups as opposed to "mechanical" ones: centralized, hierarchical, programmed, rigid systems. The former system gives responsibility to the group, allowing it to respond to the circumstances, adapt and make quick creative decisions. It brings self, and group, satisfaction. The latter try and fix and anticipate all needs; it tries to direct and limit and be in control. It tells people how to behave and, in the end, frustrates them.

And here is the rub – we are not in control of our airplane. We don't know where it going or how it is going to get there. We remove the mechanisms of control and we *have* to trust people. On the whole we believe that we know better than other people and they have to be organized "for their own good". People wouldn't come to school if we did not sanction them, would they? They wouldn't work if we didn't grade them and they certainly don't know how to educate themselves. Of course they don't ' - we are quick to remove these skills from our children:

*"The most common element with all kids is that they start off as enthusiastic learners, but by the time they have been in school for a few years they have stopped being enthusiastic about learning."*

My experience as a teacher has been that students learn better when we stop trying to control the learning process and tell them how to learn. I do not know, as a teacher what someone needs to know at any particular moment or how he or she can learn it.

Everything.com is a Napster-like model of knowledge that brings Bill Atkinson's original vision of the hyperlink to the web. It suggests a new paradigm of what E-Learning might be; not a further extension of teachers talking at students, trying to make them fit into *their* world model, but a tool to allow students to develop knowledge from their own model. The motor that runs Everything.com is downloadable free: its content is put in place by its participants and, much as with many sites that offer HTML or JavaScript tutorials, the good grow and the poor just disappear.

What distinguishes this environment from pure chaos, democratic mediocrity (we have already experienced the result of a lack of excepted criteria and shared aesthetic values in Graphic Design and Fine Art)? It is a map through the maze,; it is the example of intelligent, sensitive and communicative adults that interact with the students and help them question, learn and judge the value of what they come across. it is person to person teaching that enriches the power of a new tool.

I believe that E-Learning has the power to transform education, but I fear that it won't : it may well become "just another brick in the wall" .- after all Napster was shut down. Learning is dangerous.