

## "ICT AND LEARNING GAINS - AN IMPOSSIBLE CIRCLE?"

The following message was posted on the MirandaNet listserv:

*CAN anyone help me with this title, , what does it mean/ understand the first part, it's the second part that's baffling me - is it referring to a chicken and egg situation?*

*HELP!!!!!!*

*> rukhsana*

*>*

Really, all that title needs is Melanie Phillips' byline. I'm not surprised that it blew up a mild storm. I kept meaning to join the debate, but spent the week mired in work - both work-work and family work. Number three son, who has resisted ICT in all its manifestations all his life, phoned on the evening before Rukhsana dropped her bombshell and announced that he'd like to come and stay for a few days whilst he used my computer to 'do' his dissertation. And by the way, could I show him how to use it? He arrived. And, after he'd emptied the scraps of paper from a tired carrier bag, it dawned on me that we were talking here about more than simply transcribing the thing.

Which had to be bound and submitted by that Friday.

"The time is right." he said. He's a jazz musician. He thinks you can improvise everything.

Whilst we were at work he decided he couldn't cope with my machine and so used my partner's. Spent some time staring at the C-prompt. Made a few phone calls. Did a bit of work. Seemed satisfied until the next day, when he couldn't find his work. Used a pen and more scraps of paper. Didn't know about directories, you see.

But Lo! By the third day he was making progress. By the fourth day he'd worked out the layout, inserted footnotes and references and it was finished. The next day it was delivered into the hands of the printers, and the impressive looking result has now joined the Dissertation Mountain, care of the Academic Intervention Board. (Cue for indignation from M. Phillips.)

What's the point of all this? Well, a number of years' failed learning at school is transcended within a few days, simply because the thing has to be done. Isn't that what underlies many of the comments that people have been making?

When the words 'education' and 'learning' are used the assumption is that the transactions are mediated through the teacher to the learner. That's certainly true in a structural sense, and I suppose that fact that we earn our living in the industry causes us to invest it in a certain significance. But learning doesn't have to have anything to do with education: it's just that education has hi-jacked the whole process, so that learning can only be legitimated through the educational structures - and only those structures that have been invested with status. (cf. Boyson, Rhodes, and his encomium for The Joint Matriculation Board..)

“If schools had to teach kids to speak we’d have a lot of dumb kids ...” John Holt:  
*Reading: how to.*

William Burroughs wrote that anyone who can pick up a frypan holds the power of life and death. Read that how you want. But it can be paraphrased, and we can point out that any individual who can switch on - and switch off - a TV has got control over their own learning. With a computer the power is increased. Add the Web to that, with email and web publishing facilities, and your circle is complete. What we have is a pattern of learning that is controlled by the learner.

The learning is determined by need; by interest. Successful patterns of past learning predicate new patterns: one connection leads to another.

What I’m not talking about here, however, is content: I’m talking about learning. Not *what*, but *how*. If the learning is not successful, then the machine or the program won’t work. If you can’t read and understand the instructions you’ve either had it, you guess or make a few calls. Yes, literacy is important, but literacy is a solitary vice anyway: when is practiced in public it often leads to embarrassment and humiliation.

A flashing cursor, a ticking clock and approaching deadline are neutral. There’s no such thing as failure: either something works, or it doesn’t, and if it doesn’t one tries something else.

Latest industry figures suggest that almost 70% of household with school-age children own a PC. If they were dependent upon institutionalised learning, then they’d either be working out LOGO routines, trying to cheat their way through CAL or CALL routines, or sitting looking bored whilst somebody else sat at the keyboard and told them what was happening.

But they’re not. They’re using the things. And *they* learned how to do it. That’s the challenge. To understand HOW they learned, and map our own interpretation of learning patterns and teaching routines onto those.

Steve Moss, commenting on John Potter’s suggestion that learning about ICTs and learning with ICTs go in parallel, writes: “It is a little more complex than that ... I am sceptical that we will see real learning gains in these areas but more optimistic that we will see gains in students ability to work independently; make critical decisions about the worth of information etc. Whether the government (any government!) wants these gains - is another matter.”

The problem is that our conventional scales against which we can measure these gains are calibrated for the education system.

As a teacher, I often find myself looking in the wrong direction, for the wrong things. It’s only later that I see what has gone on.