

# Computer Cult

*Preoccupation with computers threatens academic achievement, especially critical thinking.*  
By Marian Kester Coombs

All across the country, parent-teacher associations are feverishly raising money and/or jawboning education budgets to install banks of computers, wangling space away from other school uses, hooking up every classroom to at least one computer, and diverting textbook and other monies to purchase software.

There are two major problems with the computer cult: first, the notion that computers can teach something that traditional teaching cannot; and second, the notion that the Internet is an information resource above and beyond anything human society has ever possessed before. Both notions are laughably false.

The uses to which computers are put at the primary level are particularly self-defeating. Large sums are spent on software like interactive books, *KidPix*, and *Kid Works*. These programs are used to get the students to 'read,' 'draw,' 'write,' and 'do math.' After all the high-tech folderol is dispensed with, however, each of these activities would have been more profitably conducted with paper and pencil and a good book.

Example: Children are asked to 'draw' a line segment onscreen and label it 'AB.' Because they do this electronically, it is considered superior to a manual exercise. In what way? Quite apart from the extra time involved in lining up and marching down to the computer lab, logging on, opening the program, etc., there is far less teacher supervision of what is supposedly being learned.

Some would argue that the computers ought to be in the classroom already, not down the hall. When that is the case, however, we witness an even further breakdown of classroom coherence, as kids line up to play at the terminal(s) while the teacher struggles to keep a general lesson going. In other classrooms, volunteers pull small

groups of kids out of class for special computer sessions in a continuous pattern of disruption reminiscent of Short Attention Span Theatre.

The cult's harmful ideology spills over into everyday life whenever parents, blinded by techno-faith, allow or encourage children to play endless video and computer games. The mantra parents cling to is that such play is good training for the jobs of the future. That's true if the job you have in mind is desk jockey for the



new push-button military or desensitized executioner of fellow students.

In any case, particular job skills should be taught on the job, not in the schools, their task being the conveyance of cultural literacy. The abilities to read with understanding, to think analytically, to compute and calculate accurately, to write cogently, and to speak expressively are what employers are begging for in job applicants; with those abilities as a foundation, all else can be added as needed.

Now for the second major problem: **World Wide Web worship.** Computers as channels to the fabled Internet are believed to grant instant knowledge to web surfers. Have you ever tried to research something on the Internet? You choose a search engine,

cultenter your keywords and wait as thousands of pages queue up for perusal. After sifting through the duplicates, the irrelevancies, and the dead ends, you are left with an enormous number of sites containing documents whose provenance and credibility you have no means at all of judging.

In brief, you would have done better to visit the library. A mere fraction of the knowledge of mankind has been scanned into cyberspace, and much of that fraction is fragmented, diluted, or vitiated by highly-questionable persons for entirely inscrutable or unscrupulous reasons.

The published books and magazines available at libraries or bookstores represent a much broader range of views and are far more reliable sources since the process of their production has been juried, refereed, peer-reviewed, and vetted to an extent impossible with Internet postings.

The worst fallacy of Web worship is the idea that 'information' is somehow at one's fingertips and therefore need not be lodged in one's head. Schoolchildren are being taught that it's just as good to know where to look something up as to memorize it. This theory renders the attempt to think rather like waving a wand over an empty top hat — if no rabbit's in there to start with, no rabbit's going to pop out.

Storing facts (or whatever you want to call the mental representations of knowledge) in memory enables association, comparison, cross-fertilization, and development of ideas. Memory is the food of thought. The greater the remembered store, the richer and more complex the mind's creative process. This is what critical thinking is all about.

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