

# Pandora's Box

*A blind belief in the benefits of technology can harm students, both at home and at school.*

**By C. Gary Reid**

Margaret and Jim are sitting on their sofa. Margaret says, "It's really great about young Joe! Since we bought him a Pentium III computer, he's spending all his time working in his room. Sometimes I see his light on till the early hours of the morning."

Jim replies: "I wonder if Joe is using the computer's word processor to create an essay for English or the Internet to do research for history or the spreadsheet for calculus."

There is no question that the computer is a marvelous tool. But, like all tools, mere possession of a computer does not guarantee constructive usage. Take the Internet.

The Internet is the modern version of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As the site administrator for my school network of computers, I can tell you that there are many students who do not use the Internet to access its fantastic knowledge resources.

These students really don't want to do the spreadsheet or newsletter that was assigned by their teacher. They would rather go to Napster and download music so that they can listen to it with their earphones. After that, they would prefer to use their computer to send e-mail, play games, and visit pornographic sites.

With the powerful new machines that taxpayers are generously buying for schools, it is tough for the teacher (not to mention the substitute teacher) to know whether or not the student is really working on his assignment. With the older, slower machines, it took so long to get into a particular program that a student could do only one thing at a time.

With the powerful new Pentium III desktop, however, a student can have six or seven windows open simultaneously — a flick of the mouse and the student shows the assignment on the screen. After the teacher has passed by, back to the game or the

chat room or the perusal of [www.giantbazooms.com](http://www.giantbazooms.com).

There is a law in most communities restricting minors from purchasing magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Some school boards entertain arguments about whether the Harry Potter books are suitable for the impressionable minds of their students. In other boards, there are heated debates about the merits of teaching the theory of evolution.

But there is no public debate about the mad rush to install computers and wire up every classroom to the Internet. This stampede has been engendered by computer hardware and software manufacturers who would like us to believe that computers will be the salvation of mankind.

They are selling snake oil. And, sadly, the people who are in charge of the education system are buying their wares. These educators, most of whom have never worked outside the field of education, are suckers for the advertising and hype. They are looking for the quick fix that technology always promises but seldom delivers.

Throwing money at technology is a waste of money whenever students lack the basic building blocks to understand what they are doing. Despite abundant evidence that Ontario students are deficient in basic skills, the province's decision-makers still believe that schools desperately need more money for technology.

School libraries these days are spending most of their money on computers rather than on books. As a result, when students are herded down to the library, they are mostly expected to go online to research their topic. Unfortunately, they are usually ill-prepared on how to properly search for and evaluate web sites.

Not only are these students accessing rather dubious information in some cases, but also they are learning another questionable lesson.

The fact that we are giving priority to computers is not lost on our students. They are being taught that the Internet is more important than the printed page (even though, interestingly, they regularly print out the results of their searches). They, like many of their teachers, believe that technological education is crucial to their future success.

Unfortunately, the new Ontario curriculum reinforces this belief. The grade 9 mathematics curriculum, for example, requires that students "use a scientific calculator effectively for applications that arise throughout the course." (p. 10) As well, students must be provided with graphing calculators in order to write the mandatory EQAO test of mathematics.

I worked in the information technology field for more than 20 years before I returned to teaching 11 years ago. It is my observation that language and math literacy are the most important aspects of education.

I would rather throw out all of the technology (especially the electronic calculators) and concentrate on teaching the students basic skills. Only when these skills are in place will the students be in a position to extend their reach by using technology to solve truly difficult problems.

So what is Joe doing up there in his bedroom? He may be working diligently on his explanation of Einstein's theories. On the other hand, he may be hacking into other computers. Or perhaps, despite his parents' vigilance over R-rated movies, he may be accessing far worse stuff on the Net.

But even if Margaret and Jim wise up and pull the plug at home, chances are Joe will still be able to get his jollies at school!

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