

Readin', Writin' and... Rachmaninoff?

By Andrew Nikiforuk

(Andrew Nikiforuk is the author of If Learning is so Natural, Why am I Going to School?)

Whenever business people ask what we can do for our schools, my reply is surprisingly short: "Stop pushing computers and start pushing music."

After some dumbfounded looks (edu-crats, after all, aren't demanding that businesses fund music programs), executives smile and ask, "What innovative madness is this?" My answer is as subtle as a Polish mazurka.

First, consider the economics. Given the rapid turnover in machines and software, why should taxpayers be buying equipment that will be obsolete before it is installed and doubly obsolete before being mastered by our children? As any number of business people have bluntly told me, our children don't need expensive tools to learn keyboard skills. And that is the only computer skill with any assured future.

Contrary to the blather of educrats, the research on computer-assisted learning does not glow. Computers speedily teach children how to like computers but don't pass on any love of English or science. Moreover, when the likes of Steve Jobs, of Apple Computer Inc. fame; David Gelernter, a Yale computer expert; and Clifford Stoll, a highly-respected scientist and Internet surfer, all conclude that computers can't improve our schools and may very well impoverish learning, the business community should listen and act accordingly.

And just what lessons are learned when children are abandoned to the glare of luminescent screens? According to Stoll, they include education's worst nightmares: "Accepting what a machine says without arguing. That the world is a passive preprogrammed place, where one click of the mouse gets the right answer. Transitory and shallow relationships develop from

instant e-mail. That discipline isn't necessary when they can zap frustrations with a keystroke. That grammar, analytical thought and human interactions don't matter." Sound like someone you would want to employ?



This brings me to music, a realm that enriches children, as opposed to amusing them to death. North America's anemic educrats don't herald its astounding educational and cultural merits because music means career death. Pushing computers, as opposed to an effective curriculum or, God forbid, cultural pursuits, can earn an incompetent administrator a quick promotion. Extolling the virtues of music is almost as anathema as literacy is to many educators.

Yet a well-run elementary-school music program can awaken more young brains than a fleet of personal computers. In fact, the great Hungarian computer, Zoltán Kodály, proved the great academic power of music more than 50 years ago.

Recognizing that culture simply dies when elders don't pass it on, he designed an ingenious and cost-efficient music program for schools. Take the human voice, the cheapest instrument

around said Kodály, and have it learn some of the world's most beautiful melodies: nursery rhymes and folk songs. Kodály believed that folk songs, with their elegant five-tone scales, spoke a child's language and opened the doors to classical music. Unlike many modern educators, Kodály knew that you can't shape discriminating appetites, musical or otherwise, with a diet of fast food.

Combined with hand signals, special melodic sequences and well-trained teachers, the Kodály method can teach any child how to read, understand and make music. The research on the academic effects of such instruction is glowing: musical training increases speech fluency; folk songs improve general knowledge of history and geography; rhythm training abets the development of math skills; and the learning of new melodies builds memory.

In sum, schools with daily music lessons simply produce more thoughtful and versatile students than those without Mozart. Yet educrats prefer to remain ignorant of such facts, said Edite Mogensen, the former president of the Ontario Registered Music Teachers' Association. "And if the decision-makers don't realize the importance of music, they're not going to spend money on it."

So, if your company has some spare dollars for cash-strapped schools, invest them in good music programs. Instead of enriching computer firms, you'll help give children a better grasp of language and math, as well as Beethoven.

And you'll be respecting Gelernter's golden rule of schooling: "You cannot teach a child anything unless you look him in the face."

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