Time-Travel as Punishment

What our kids REALLY hate

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I recently heard a school librarian describe her approach to getting kids to take an interest in projects she wants them to do. She offers them two alternatives: Plan A is for the kids to use any and all of the computers, phones and other technology at their disposal to do the project. Plan B is to do it the old way—hauling books, encyclopedias, dictionaries etc. off the shelves, and copying and writing only by hand. Almost all the kids choose plan A, she said. They see plan B as punishment—often severe punishment.

This extends, I believe, to almost all of our current, non-technology-assisted, 20th century education—today's kids now see even our old "best teaching" as punishment. The kids know—and feel—that when they enter our schools they are being sent back to the past, and for today's kids, such educational time travel is hurtful.

Educators must go deeper, however, than just using technology as a meaningless coating on the surface. I recommend that teachers focus on the "verbs" or skills of education (e.g. communicating, persuading, etc.) which stay the same, rather than on the "nouns" kids use to learn, practice and do the skills (e.g. email, texting, Twitter, PowerPoint), which change rapidly.

I recommend that teachers search for and use "powerful" uses of technology—things young people couldn't ever do before, like communicating around the world, or analyzing public databases with trillions of data points, rather than using technology just to do old things in new ways.

When our kids see the computers in their classroom sitting dark and unused most of the time (there are 4 such in my kid's 2nd grade room); when our kids know that there are iPads in the school that they only get to use once in a great while (ditto in my son's school); when our kids know that they, or their classmates, have powerful tools in their pocket (Skype, spreadsheets, Siri) which most adults use to do their work, but that they are banned from even looking at, it sends them a horrible, punishing message. "Sorry kids. School's job is not to prepare you for your future life and times. School's job is to force you back into the past where we, your teachers and parents, came from."

We are teaching our kids to swim in the primordial pond where we grew up, when our kids have already moved onto land (and space). Not that they are doing perfectly there, but that is where they live and need to be taught.

We are often held back by perspective. Too many adults still think, in their hearts, that the ways of the past are *better*—the new-fangled, technologically-based methods make it "too easy" for

kids. Even my seven-year-old thinks that asking Siri for a definition (which I encourage him to do at home), is "cheating." This negative attitude is encourages at school.

Of course being able to organize one's thoughts in a logical fashion is something we want all our kids to be able to do. But why in an essay? Why not in a video? Why not in a multimedia presentation or in an app they create?

The many who, to their credit, make fruitful use of new technology too often insist on teaching, or allowing, the old ways as well. "They'll need it for their college applications and papers" is a typical excuse for such punishment. No they won't. If they can speak logically, it can be transcribed (we have voice-to-text!) for a college application. Any kid who can produce a fantastic on-air piece, or app will get into college—if that's what they want—and do fine. We have to divorce the skills (e.g. thinking logically) from the old, punishing ways of executing and demonstrating them.

I, too, come from the primordial pond. I learned to write well and now I write books, essays and columns like this for a living. But I increasingly use voice-to-text tools to do so. Online videos, such as TED Talks, or videos posted on You Tube, reach orders of magnitude more people than books or essays ever will. As a result, I am now starting the process of converting everything I have ever written to video.

Reading and writing are still foundational. But we need to accept and act on the new reality that technology is *equally foundational* in our times. Just as we wouldn't do a day, a unit or a lesson in any school or grade without incorporating some reading and writing, we should never do anything in school without incorporating technology. Our school computers should *never* be dark—they add so much to whatever we do. Even if all the kids can't use them at once, we must have them take turns, assigning them daily, revolving roles like "RSS researcher" or "designated Internet surfer."

In the 21st century, we are human-technology hybrids—technology is now part of us. With well over 5 billion cell phone accounts active, the ratio of cell phones to people over the age of 10 *in the entire world* is more than 90 percent. We still have pockets of lower penetration, of course. But no kid in the world doesn't know technology exists, and there is almost no kid who doesn't want to use it as soon as he or she possibly can.

Restructuring our education to fit the new human-technology context and symbiosis is perhaps our greatest educational challenge. Our failure to do so quickly—and our thinking that sending our kids into the past still offers them a useful education—is an increasingly cruel punishment.

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