

Bracey, G. (2000). Some comments on "If We Didn't Have the Schools We Have Today, Would We Create the Schools We Have Today." *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 1(1), 141-144.

# SOME COMMENTS ON "IF WE DIDN'T HAVE THE SCHOOLS WE HAVE TODAY, WOULD WE CREATE THE SCHOOLS WE HAVE TODAY?"

Gerald W. Bracey

But I reckon I got to light out for the territory `cause.

Aunt Sally, she wants to civilize me and I know

I can't stand it. I been there before.

Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*

It's dangerous to make predictions, especially about the future.

Attributed to both Mark Twain and Samuel Goldwyn

These quotes kept clicking into my head as I read Thomas Carroll's paper on what learning will look like in the future. As I read along, I kept having the sensation that I had been here before.

"Here" in one early instance was the tired analogy drawn about a decade ago that the doctor from 100 years ago would be lost in today's hospital, while a teacher from the 19<sup>th</sup> century would feel right at home (originating, I think, with Seymour Papert). Really? I would like to see a nice Edwardian lady handle today's kids. Chaos within five minutes, I bet.

More importantly, a lot of classroom behavior has changed. Kids "publish" writing and have it critiqued by other kids, for instance. They engage in hands-on activities. They talk to each other (not in my day). Beyond that, does this sound like a schoolroom of today?

What I remember from my experiences as a pupil are the strictness of discipline, the catechistic type of recitation, the dullness of the textbooks and the complete absence of any obvious connection between our class work and the activities we carried on outside of school...The view held by most teachers and parents was that the school was quite separate from other institutions in society and its tasks should be sufficiently distasteful to the pupils to require strong discipline to undertake them and carry them through.

That is Ralph Tyler (1976) at age 72 in 1974 reflecting on what school was like in the "good `ole days."

More often, Carroll's comments carried me back to *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1970). Carroll

sounds like nothing so much as Ivan Illich, *sans* ideology and *avec* technology. Indeed, Illich's "Learning Webs" are advanced over Carroll's "Networked Learning Communities," because they are more differentiated and lay out the *purposes* and *goals* that might serve to organize such a web. At no point that I saw in Carroll's paper was there any real discussion of why we are doing all this learning in the first place.

As Carroll discussed learning communities, I kept wondering, "Who decided what they were going to study?" "On the basis of what criteria?" "Why and how did these people come together?" It seems to me that a genuine learning community and compulsory attendance laws are mutually exclusive.

Carroll presents the activity of the town of Tanaskee, Washington, as a learning community. But is it? As presented, anyway, it seems like a top-down reaction to a problem: Our kids are leaving town; how can we get some of them to stay and carry on the traditional way we make a living here, namely by growing apples? It doesn't seem to me that the orchard owners were the "L" in the network. They don't seem to be modeling learning, as an "L" is supposed to. They seem to be passing along information about how an orchard works to people who do not know. That is, they are operating like traditional teachers. And technology is nowhere to be seen in solving the problem.

Note that the purpose of this formed "community" is to preserve apple growing. In a meeting where the principal reform commission of Kentucky was extolling the virtues of high expectations, high skills for everyone, the audience booed. The audience booed because they knew there were no jobs in the area to support that level of skill, and so the kids would leave home, destroying families—something very dear in that part of the state.

Carroll declares that "any organization that adopts a new technology without significant organizational change is doomed to failure. You have to change the organization. You can't just add the technology." I agree. Probably most educators, remembering the cold bodies of projects that died because of inadequate staff development, would. But, aside from saying we have to change the roles of teachers, students, and administrators, Carroll provides not even a hint of how and what. He launches into descriptions of the transition of ships from sails to steam engines and from banks as places of deposit and withdrawal to places with an array of services. Futurist articles are often long on schematic diagrams and analogies from other fields and short on concrete examples of the matter at hand.

In other sections of the paper, technology carries an aura of inevitability about it. Things will happen no matter what. "The web won." It seems to me that a network made up of people who actually know and see each other might well differ on many dimensions from one in which one or two people are personal friends and the rest are digital buddies on a screen.

Again, this raises the issue of purpose—who gets to choose who learns and what—and, just behind that, the issue of power. Illich, writing in 1970, presented an example of Bolivia, which built a government-controlled TV station for the nation at a time when there were only 7,000 television sets in a nation of four million.

For the same money, the government could have provided every fifth adult with a tape recorder. "This network of tape recorders, of course, would be radically different from the present network of TV. It would provide opportunity for free expression. Literate and illiterate alike could record, preserve, disseminate, and repeat their opinions." The apparent beauty of the Internet is its

openness, but it is open here, not in China. We will see what transpires in the future.

As a minor digression, I do not mean to present Illich as a flawless thinker. At one point he writes, "Only hindsight will allow us to discover if the Great Cultural Revolution will turn out to be the first successful attempt at deschooling the institutions of society." He clearly hopes so. Thirty years on, I think we know.

Carroll says, "The third reason schools will be driven to change is that we have now reached a point where work is learning." This is not a research paper, so I did not expect him to provide citations for this, but if he had tried, he would have failed. *Some* work is learning, but most of it is not. The 10 fastest growing occupations are in either computer-related or medical fields, and most of them imply learning (Bureau of Labor Statistics). But most hours in even these jobs are doing, not learning.

Moreover, these fastest growing jobs do not account for many jobs relative to a lot of low-skill occupations. The jobs that do, are not learning jobs: retail sales, cashiers, truck drivers, and general office clerks. The number of retail sales jobs is almost as great as the number of top 10 fastest growing jobs combined.

Where I do agree with Carroll is that there is a press for change because "the kids get it!" I think we will see a great deal more of learning at home (not the same as home schooling), simply because it is possible and effective. A bunch of students at Columbine High School might be alive today if school had not forced Klebold and Harris to actually show up. With the onset of so much niche-knowledge so early in people's lives it will simply not be possible for a single teacher to keep up with a class of 25 diverse students.

In my own writings and speeches, I have pointed out that the top states in this nation score almost as high as the top countries in the 41-nation Third International Mathematics and Science Study. Suburban students do even better. On the other hand, only one country, South Africa, scored lower than the students in Washington, DC, and only two countries, Colombia and Kuwait scored the same. The other 38 all scored higher. There is a "digital divide." Computers are a "white thing," especially in terms of home use. I wish the paper had addressed what to do about this dire situation.

I would not want these comments to be taken as antitechnology or pro-traditional school. I have been a fan of computers in education since the advent of the Apple II and TRS-80. I saw in those machines transformative potential not present in main frames and minis. The Internet has in many ways revolutionized my life, and I see no reason why it should not do this for schools as well. This paper though, while it might stimulate some conversations, does not seem to advance us much toward solutions.

## References

Illich, Ivan (1970). *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper & Row.

Tyler, Ralph (1976). *Perspectives on American education: Reflections on the past, challenges for the future*. Chicago: Science Research Associates.

US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000, February 9). *Economic and employment projections* [On-line]. Available at <http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t06.htm>

Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education is an online journal. All text, tables, and figures in the print version of this article are exact representations of the original. However, the original article may also include video and audio files, which can be accessed on the World Wide Web at <http://www.citejournal.org>