Technology Biography

(a)   In 1983, when I was five years old, my father bought an Apple IIc for work on his master's thesis project, which consisted of writing a computer program in a computer language called SuperPILOT. As a student in the education department, he had access to a whole lot of educational software, which he brought home for me to use. Some of these programs were fascinating--The Learning Company made fantastic educational programs like Rocky's Boots and Robotropolis. From these extraordinary programs, and other more generic ones, I built up strong reading and math skills.

My love of computers began at an early age, and I still love using computers today. There is an endless variety of new hardware and software to peruse, and it is very interesting to watch the technology progress. Computers have also improved my life in significant ways. I have miserable handwriting, and the computer thus makes my life a lot easier by eliminating the need to hand-write documents. I am also very disorganized, and the computer helps me out with this problem by carefully filing away all my projects. I use the internet a great deal as well--with the growing amount of academic information available on the internet, it is an excellent research tool. I also use it to look up the latest news.

However, despite the fact that I love using computers, I have significant misgivings about them, especially as they (computers) relate to education. A lot of educational software is lacking in both technical and pedagogical innovation. When one considers the progress that computer technology has made as a whole since the 1980s, educational software has not fared well in comparison to other sectors of the software industry (e.g. games, professional applications).

I also worry that computers may not be a good investment for education. Having a laptop-equipped classroom with a wireless network sounds cool, but does it really delivery $30,000[1] worth of educational benefits? Does the laptop classroom convincingly beat the old standby of pencils, paper, chalk, and books? It is undoubtedly worthwhile to know how to use a computer to some extent. However, when we focus too much on "computer literacy", we may be taking crucial time away from *actual* literacy. The pundits say that there is an "information revolution" happening, but I am concerned about the ability of forthcoming generations to properly process information in the form of text.

I also worry about the philosophical implications of computer technology in the classroom. For example, last class, some people were talking about systems that monitor students' progress. Having a computer supplant/supplement a teacher as the monitor of the students' progress smacks of the production-line mentality. Teachers should not monitor students in the same way that corporate managers monitor workers--to do this warps the student/teacher relationship and dehumanizes the student.

The hype surrounding computer technology also bothers me. People think that computer technology should do everything and go everywhere. A new device called

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[1] I'm just guessing at this price

Mimeo will capture the things I write on a whiteboard. I can hook a GPS device up to my Handspring PDA. And, with the Olympus Eye-Trek, which allows you to watch big-screen movies using a device you attach to your head, you can block out the rest of the world virtually wherever you go.

The Olympus Eye-Trek (www.olympus-eye-trek.com)

Frankly, I question the value of some of these gadgets, which seem to me to be products of an overheated and overhyped technology sector.

Computer technology also removes us from each other. Technology advocates talk about the internet as bringing together a global village, but it only brings people together in a very weak sense. The contacts that people have with each other on the internet are shallow compared with interactions in the real world. It is true that you can "get it all" on the internet--the trouble is that you "get it all" in a way that is usually superficial and banal.

Yet, despite all my concerns about computer technology, I am in no hurry to get rid of my own computer. There are a lot of creative things that can be done with computers, and it is interesting to explore the possibilities of this new technology. However, we must not let out enthusiasm for this technology run roughshod over simple question, "Is this particular application of computer technology worthwhile?" In America today, the hype-rich social climate has meant that the answer to this question has almost always been "Yes". We need to say "No" a lot more often.

(b) Technology available to me:

I use a Macintosh Powerbook G3 running OS X (the best operating system I have ever seen) for all of my work, but I have experience with both Macintoshes and PCs. All of my word-processing work has been done in AppleWorks. I use Eudora and Internet Explorer for my internet needs. I have experience with HTML, which I have usually hand-coded in a text editor (SimpleText, WordPad). In the past, I have used PhotoPaint and CorelDraw for image editing. I also know how to use QuattroPro, WordPerfect, and Acrobat.