Technology in the Classroom: Friend or Foe?

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The proliferation of technology has transformed modern society on many levels. In the classroom, technology is changing the way children learn, educators teach and how teachers and students communicate with one another. While technology provides greater access to information and new ways for students to learn, it can become a crutch hindering creative problem solving and cognitive development.

Given the rise of technology in the classroom, we are faced with a dilemma: Does technology provide our students with experience they need to succeed in the 21st century, or does it hinder them from developing valuable skills that are only attainable through human interaction?

One approach, illustrated by New Tech Network high schools, aims to completely immerse students in technology to help them develop modern-day skills. These schools believe that full access to technology, including computers and the Internet, enables students to become self-directed learners. The goal is to help students develop the research and analysis skills they’ll need later in life, rather than depending on teachers or textbooks for knowledge and direction.

Other arguments in favor of technology in the classroom include:

• Exposing children to technology at an early age prepares them for college and the workforce where knowledge of technology is essential for success.
• Technology fosters connections between people and information, no matter where they are in the world, giving students access to resources around the globe.
• Because children frequently absorb information through technology in their day-to-day lives, they may be more motivated and interested in lessons when technology is used as a teaching tool.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Association of Waldorf Education in North America emphasizes hands-on experiences through music, dance and writing, as they believe these experiences cultivate a love of learning and help to develop students’ intellectual, emotional and spiritual capacities. Take, for example, the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, based in Silicon Valley — the heart of technological innovation. It’s a school that likely has the funds and resources to provide classroom technology; in fact, three-quarters of the students’ parents work for high-tech companies like Google, Apple and Yahoo. And yet, the school doesn’t allow computers in the classroom and prefers students not use them at home. Parents and teachers believe that meaningful engagement comes first and foremost from teachers and peers, and that computers and technology are more distraction than resource.

Other arguments against technology in the classroom include:

• Online instructional videos and programs don’t compare to classroom discussions where students have the opportunity to ask questions and hear the opinions of their peers and teachers.
• There is a level of interaction through an active classroom discussion that you simply can’t replicate on a computer screen.

• It’s imperative that students learn how to socialize without technology. It’s often through engagement with teachers that children learn valuable life lessons such as respect, manners and self-esteem.

• Teachers are one of the most important factors in a student’s development and ability to succeed.

Technology in the classroom also presents a question about how our nation’s education dollars should be spent. President Obama’s 2012 budget proposed to create an Advanced Research Projects Agency for Education to fund projects aimed to transform teaching and learning in the same way that the Internet, GPS and robotics have transformed commerce, travel and warfare. At the same time, many classrooms lack even the most basic supplies. How we view technology in the classroom will help to determine our funding priorities.

Where do you stand on the use of technology in the classroom?