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EDUCATION AND THE INTERNET
On A Potential Road to Nowhere?

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Technological innovations of the past have created immediate time notions of awe and power that have not always fostered objective perspectives and long-term understandings of the place of these innovations in the nurturing and betterment of civic institutions and participation. This paper, presented at the University of Guam’s College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences’ 27th Annual Conference, draws from the instructive innovation of the automobile in relation to these institutions and explores linkages to be potentially drawn to our current era’s innovation of the Internet, its use in education, and its place in Pacific epistemologies.

At the recent ALISE conference for library educators in San Antonio, Dr. Randy Bass of Georgetown University discussed the Visible Knowledge Project’s focus on integrating pedagogy into the application of technology in teaching the humanities. Basic to the various scholarly projects of inquiry surrounding this focus is the need to achieve quality learning rather than the typical responses of technological productivity and efficiency with occasional pockets of innovation. A research project in the Visible Knowledge Project for example entitled “Bridging Lectures and Texts through Technology” uses directed online writing assignments and online discussion boards to make linkages between the lectures they hear and the texts they read and the films they see related to a course on ‘Contemporary America’. Visible Knowledge Projects like this ask questions such as:

“What roles and impact do new media technologies have in helping to make the tacit knowledge of expert learners visible to students?”

“How can interactive learning environments enhance the way students acquire knowledge in culture and history courses?”

“In what pedagogical contexts do technology-enhanced environments help novice student learners achieve deeper understanding and engage in more meaningful learning?”

Questions related to faculty development include:

“What makes it possible for faculty to engage in innovation thoughtfully?”

“How do certain frameworks, tools, and models enable innovation? Can a richer context for innovation help faculty implement change at deeper levels of transformation than is generally possible at present?”

I would like to pause at this last question being pursued in the Visible Knowledge Project to point out how we might loose out on the avail-
ability of this “richer context for innovation” given the numerous pitfalls available to us if our enthusiasm for information through technology comes to overshadow the enrichment of student understanding that is at the core of higher education.

Throughout history there have been any number of innovations that have changed the way we live—the steam engine, coal driven industrial mechanisms, the airplane, the automobile, the computer, and of course the Internet. At the time of these innovations, people looked upon these new objects with awe and a feeling that one was living in an age of tremendous change and that life would never be the same again. At the center of these supposed eternal changes was the object that made such change possible. The automobile, for example, has had a long history of anticipated changes—many of which have of course come to pass. Apart of course from trains, people could move much quicker and farther between two places than was possible at any time in history. And they could do it in their own confined spaces without really having to deal with strangers as they did when travelling in trains. Mechanical breakdowns made this movement problematic but then an industry of car repair and car construction and innovation was born in response and today the automobile is an assumed part of our lives.

But what has the automobile done to the environments in which we live—which were themselves created over time? Steve Talbott, in an article in his Netfuture website entitled “Automobiles: On the Road to Nowhere,” argues that the way in which city suburbs were constructed as mere real estate ventures without any chance given for civic institutions and values to develop is indicative of the thoughtlessness with which we, in our particular era of change, have accepted the presence and function of the Internet in many realms of our society—realms which potentially include education. The automobile itself erased any semblance of community in the new suburbs with roads built entirely to accommodate the automobile and led to the degradation of American cities by the movement of the middle class into suburbs whose infrastructures had nothing to do with the betterment of human life but rather to accommodate the presence and use of the automobile. Talbott’s comparison between the history of the car in American suburbs and the history of the Internet in society merits quoting at length:

“If those roads sucked life out of cities and led to the “geography of nowhere,” he writes, “what will be the consequences of our own, much more radical attempt to transfer the entire range of social institutions into the nowhere of cyberspace? It’s not that we can’t find positive potentials in the new information technologies. The problem, rather, is that we have devoted vast, heavily subsidized, and purely technical resources to throwing up the infrastructure as an end in itself. “Let the institutions adapt to the new landscape or else die out,” we say with smug confidence in the gospel of technological progress. But the only healthy approach is the reverse of this: our loving attention to the evolutionary necessities of this or that institution should be what determines the technical landscape.”

I have always been intrigued by the overall dynamics of discussions about the pros and cons of Internet use in education—when these discussions come up at all. To question the use of the Internet and related technologies in education often seems to prompt an ‘either you’re for it or you’re against it’ framework. After all, why would anyone question the use of the Internet to further education objectives when its potentials are so, well, awe-inspiring? Rather than leading to any kind of reflective discussion on the impact of technology on the quality of life through education, this kind of divide is more reflective of a lack of reflection on the Internet than of anything else. Perhaps just as the automobile was accepted at the expense of anything else, with infrastructures driven at its command rather than at the command of social institutions and values, this lack of reflective discussion on the limits of technology and the Internet in education is ominously similar to historical responses to the automobile in relation to society. And certainly it may seem strange that a librarian such as myself who is obligated to keep up with technological changes for the sake of helping people to ac-
In some respects, all professions create a world—even a reality—unto themselves. Beginning with the socialization of people into a profession through the curricula adapted for professional programs followed by a professional discourse that develops from published literatures and conferences that are concerned with the values and expertise taught in those programs. Professionals have a specific expertise to offer to the world and when they use that expertise to deal with a particular problem or need, they do so because the public that uses their expertise sees them as authorities and thus deserving of respect. Certain threats to this respect or to this authority can prompt the creation of confining limits to the discourses that a particular profession pursues and uses as a means to distinguish the professional from the non-professional. My own profession of librarianship has been guilty of this, as any honest, analytical approach to its history will reveal. Our focus from the beginning has been on accessing this entirely undefined phenomenon known as “information.” Melvil Dewey’s first library school in the late nineteenth century began an emphasis on access and it is an emphasis that has continued to this day and is certainly further solidified by the innovations of technology. As a result, librarianship has tended to see information simply as an object to be accessed while essentially ignoring a very relevant professional research literature on the concept and dynamics of reading itself—an obviously major means by which the people librarianship serves obtain their information. And yet we as professionals are pretty much unaware of this literature. And bringing this closer to home, I should point out that despite the communal nature of practically all indigenous Pacific societies, the application of the ethnography of reading scholarship and its literature is practically unheard of in the Pacific. This is an example of how a profession can confine itself to intellectual dimensions that are reinforced time and again not only by tradition (beginning with Dewey’s library school over a hundred years ago) but by the products and perspectives that innovations can produce. During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, more and more library patrons were finding their way to this thing called “information” through computers and on their own, prompting the profession of librarianship to scrabble to establish itself as a player in technology and eventually of course the Internet—again ignoring scholarship on the things their patrons do most, whether it is from a book or a computer screen—read.

One perspective that is increasingly marginalized in discussions of education and technology is that of the role of the one source of information that has been the foundation of education for centuries—the book. Why now, in the midst of our particular era’s awe-inspiring innovation—the Internet—should the book seem to become increasingly passé? Is it because the Internet, like the automobile, simply has that quality of being able to prompt widespread infatuation that deprives us of the ability to maintain perspective or at least to be challenged by the potential of losing perspective? Or are we becoming a part of our so-called modern society’s ease with ease—with shortcuts to knowledge and thus to an understanding of things that are both potentially shallow but acceptable as knowledge over a broad range of society?

We give ‘the book’ our verbal allegiance—particularly when we refer to the library—but the book itself as a product to be thoroughly consumed seems to be on the road to becoming less practical and too time consuming when we have instead the speed of the Internet to give us a synopsis of a thought from a book that will, in association with other synopses be good enough for all—or most—concerned. But when a few students have told me in the past that they were able to graduate without having to read a book or almost without having...
to read a book, I am greatly disturbed for obvious reasons.

It is not easy to look at ourselves at any time and suddenly discover some trait or belief that we now see as faulty or so wrong that we suddenly become transformed and approach life in ways we never imagined possible. To do so in the context of a profession is harder yet, considering the broad, worldly strokes of reality that a profession establishes not only in its professional training programs but also in its professional conferences and research papers that are themselves driven by the demands society places upon a profession and the paradigms of importance that all professions create. The Internet can either become our automobile and lead us into a context less suburb devoid of perspectives because of the technological awe that inspires us or it can become so integral to the learning process that its thoughtful use to achieve depth of knowledge and independent thought becomes simply another tool. But to do so requires a perspective that originates from an ability to stand back, as it were, and see education’s landscape for what it is and what it could become entirely in its own right and in its own context. At the risk of possibly displeasing any librarians present, let me give one more example of the need for perspectives on technology from my own profession.

Libraries came to the western Pacific through colonial processes that the United States engaged in following the end of World War II—a subject that has been thoroughly examined by David Hanlon in his book Re-making Micronesia: Discourses Over Development in a Pacific Territory. Hanlon documents how the transference of American social institutions and the American foundations and values attached to them constituted attempts to bring Micronesia closer to America and its military and political objectives—in a sense to better Americanize and yes, control Micronesians under an American driven context. Libraries with their American derived texts and ideas of what constitutes “information” were simply one of many such institutions brought to the Western Pacific.

Among everyday people in Micronesia, libraries seem to be looked upon as a kind of hushing institution holding texts that are more symbolic of great treatises of knowledge than of a lengthy collection of pages of words to be read with care. This is certainly not to say some books are not read or that people in Micronesia—or on Guam for that matter—are incapable of reading them. Rather, the book as it has been introduced and encouraged over the past several decades, has had a foundationless background to itself and is not specific to the vast cultural heritages within which it is intended to benefit and function for the public good. The book has been a part of American libraries that were introduced as indeed an American institution like so many other American institutions and values that were simply expected to function in Micronesia just as they did in the United States. At the time the library was introduced into Micronesia through the Library Services and Construction Act in 1967, public libraries had functioned in the American context for well over one hundred years.

Jesse Shera, one of the most prolific and far reaching library scholars in our profession of librarianship, continuously made the point of how a library and the books in them should share a common sense of a society’s epistemology—how a society gains and maintains its knowledge about things. Unfortunately, most librarians do not seem to read Shera now nor is the idea of understanding a society’s epistemology considered realistic or even considered when in fact the failure to do so is at the core of the mystery we now have of how the library actually fits into Micronesian societies. We may never really understand this now. Although there are several examples from the past of projects and presentation at local conferences concerned with local cultures and how to make certain information resources reflective of local values, there has never been an epistemological based study of libraries in either the South Pacific or the North Pacific. I am aware of only one published short article in the South Pacific that has complained of what should be (but isn’t) a glaring gap in our understanding of the presence and use of text-based information in
Pacific libraries. Because of this, we could say that libraries and the use of information in them—including that which is technologically and electronically based—have been promoted in the Pacific region almost as if we were living in Iowa, Georgia, or California. So the issue of how the book may be considered on Guam in the year 2006 may have some of its origins in the origin-less nature (other than of an American nature) of its introduction.

I think this is all instructive for the way that we look at our innovation of the Internet in our era of change. Programs such as the Visible Knowledge Project and its search for a “richer context for innovation” become essential avenues for examining the places or crossroads between the application of technology and the student experience of texts and their meanings. If educators are at ease with the ease with which “information” is “accessed” and there are no real questions about whether or not depth of content is being sacrificed in the use of technology in the classroom—or better yet—if the professional discourse on the era of technological innovation of the classroom cannot see that depth is being sacrificed (perhaps somewhat in the same way that my profession of librarianship has overlooked the scholarship of reading in its creation of a professional world), then we may want to think back to those civic-less, soulless suburban areas built for the sake of the automobile. Fifty years from now, is it possible that a few old-fashioned scholars will lament over the limits of student learning and scholarship under the control of the ease of the Internet while the rest of the academy will become incapable of appreciating their message? Will the automobile of our age—the Internet—have thus driven itself to nowhere? I think only if we remember the values of higher education as they still stand and treat the Internet as an innovation not deserving of our awe but only our desire to use it with perspective and in a quest for depth of knowledge will we still be on the road to somewhere.

ENDNOTES
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