

Computers and Computer Cultures

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In most contemporary educational situations where children come into contact with computers the computer is used to put children through their paces, to provide exercises of an appropriate level of difficulty, to provide feedback, and to dispense information. The computer programming the child. In the LOGO environment the relationship is reversed: The child is in control: The child programs the computer. And in teaching the computer how to think, children embark on an exploration about how they themselves think. Thinking about thinking turns the child into an epistemologist, an experience not even shared by most adults.

After five years of study with Jean Piaget in Geneva, I came away impressed by his way of looking at children as the active builders of their own intellectual structures. To say that intellectual structures are built by the learner rather than taught by a teacher does not mean that they are built from nothing. Like other

builders, children appropriate to their own use materials they find about them, most saliently the models and metaphors suggested by the surrounding culture.

Piaget writes about the order in which

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the child develops different intellectual abilities. I give more weight than he does to the influence of the materials a certain culture provides in determining that order. For example, our culture is very rich in materials useful for the child's

construction of certain components of numerical and logical thinking. Children learn to count; they learn that the result of counting is independent of order and special arrangement; they extend this "conservation" to thinking about the properties of liquids as they are poured and of solids which change their shape. Children develop these components of thinking pre-consciously and "spontaneously," that is to say without deliberate teaching. Other components of knowledge, such as the skills involved in doing permutations and combinations, develop more slowly, or do not develop at all without formal schooling.

The computer presence might have more fundamental effects than did other new technologies, including television and even printing. The metaphor of computer as a mathematics speaking entity puts the learner in a qualitatively new kind of relationship to an important domain of knowledge. Even the best of educational television is limited to offering quantitative improvements in the kinds of learning that existed without it. Sesame Street might offer better and more engaging explanations than a child can get from some parents or nursery school teachers, but the child is still in the business of listening to explanations. By contrast, when a child learns to program, the process of learning is transformed. It becomes more active and self directed. The knowledge is acquired for

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a recognizable personal purpose. The child does something with it. The new knowledge is a source of power and is experienced as such from the moment it begins to form in the child's mind.

I have spoken of mathematics being learned in a new way. But much more is affected than mathematics. Piaget distinguishes between "concrete" thinking and "formal" thinking. Concrete thinking is already well on its way by the time the child enters first grade at age 6 and is consolidated in the following several years. Formal thinking does not develop until the child is almost 12, give or take a year or two, and some researchers have even suggested that many people never achieve fully formal thinking. I do not fully accept Piaget's distinction, but I am sure that it is close enough to reality to help us make sense of the idea that the consequences for intellectual development of one innovation could be qualitatively greater than the cumulative quantitative effects of a thousand others. My conjecture is that the computer can concretize (and personalize) the formal. Seen in this light, it is not just another powerful educational tool. It is unique in providing us with the means for addressing what Piaget and many others see as the obstacle which is overcome in the passage from child to adult thinking. I believe that it can allow us to shift the boundary separating concrete and formal. Knowledge that was accessible only through formal processes can now be approached concretely. And the real magic comes from the fact that this knowledge includes those elements one needs to become a formal thinker.

This description of the role of the computer is rather abstract. I shall concretize it by looking at the effect of working with computers on two kinds of thinking Piaget associates with the formal stage of intellectual development: combinatorial thinking, where one has to reason in terms of the set of all possible states of a system, and self referential thinking about thinking itself.

In a typical experiment in combinatorial thinking, children are asked to form all the possible combinations (or "families") of beads of assorted colors. It really is quite remarkable that most children are unable to do this systematically and accurately until they are in the fifth or sixth grades. Why should this be? Why does the task seem to be so much more difficult than the intellectual feats accomplished by seven and eight year old children? Is its logical structure essentially more complex? Can it possibly require a neurological mechanism that does not mature until the approach of puberty? I think that a more likely explanation is provided by looking at the nature of the culture. The task of making the families of beads can be looked at as



constructing and executing a program, a very common sort of program, in which two loops are nested: Fix a first color and run through all possible second colors, then repeat until all possible first colors have been run through. For someone who is thoroughly used to computers and programming there is nothing "formal" or abstract about this task. For a child in a computer culture it would be as con-

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crete as matching up knives and forks at the dinner table. Even the common "bug" of including some families twice (for example, red-blue and blue-red) would be well known. Our culture is rich in pairs, couples, and one to one correspondences of all sorts, and it is rich in language for talking about such things. This richness provides both the incentive and a supply of models and tools for children to build ways to think about such issues as whether three large pieces of candy are



more or less than four smaller pieces. For such problems our children acquire an excellent intuitive sense of quantity. But our culture is relatively poor in models of systematic procedures. Until recently there was not even a name in popular language for programming, let alone for the ideas needed to do so successfully. There is no word for "nested loops" and no word for the double counting bug. Indeed, there are no words for the powerful ideas computerists refer to as "bug" and "debugging."

Without the incentive or the materials to build powerful, concrete ways to think about problems involving systematicity, children are forced to approach such problems, in a groping, abstract fashion. Thus cultural factors can explain the difference in age at which children build their intuitive knowledge of quantity and of systematicity.

While still working in Geneva I had become sensitive to the way in which materials from the then very young computer cultures were allowing psychologists to develop new ways to think about thinking. In fact, my entry into the world of computers was motivated largely by the idea that children could also benefit, perhaps even more than the psychologist, from the way in which computer models seemed to be able to give concrete form to areas of knowledge that had previously appeared so intangible and abstract.

I began to see how children who had learned to program computers could use very concrete computer models to think about thinking and to learn about learning and in doing so, enhance their powers as psychologists and as epistemologists. For example, many children are held back in their learning because they have a model of learning in which you have either "got it" or "got it wrong." But when you learn to program a computer you almost never get it right the first time. Learning to be a master programmer is learning to become highly skilled at isolating and correcting "bugs," the parts that keep the program from working. The question to ask about the program is not whether it is right or wrong, but if it is fixable. If this way of looking at intellectual products were generalized to how the larger culture thinks about knowledge and its acquisition, we might all be less intimidated by our fears of "being wrong." This potential influence of the computer on changing our notion of a black and white version of our successes and failures is an example of using the computer as an "object to think with." It is obviously not necessary to work with computers in order to acquire good strategies for learning. Surely "debugging" strategies were developed by successful learners long before computers existed. But thinking about learning by analogy

Computer Cultures, continued...

with developing a program is a powerful and accessible way to get started on becoming more articulate about one's debugging strategies and more deliberate about improving them.

My discussion of a computer culture and its impact on thinking presupposes a massive penetration of powerful computers into people's lives. That this will happen there can be no doubt. The calculator, the electronic game, and the digital watch were brought to us by a technical revolution that rapidly lowered prices for electronics in a period when all others were rising with inflation. That same technological revolution, brought about by the integrated circuit, is now bringing us the personal computer.

There really is no disagreement among experts that the cost of computers will fall to a level where they will enter everyday life in vast numbers. Some will be there as computers proper, that is to say, programmable machines. Others might appear as games of ever increasing complexity and in automated supermarkets where the shelves, maybe even the cans, will talk. There is no doubt that the material surface of life will become very different for everyone, perhaps most of all for children. But there has been a significant difference of opinion about the effects this computer presence will produce. I would distinguish my thinking

from two trends of thinking which I refer to here as the "skeptical" and the "critical."

Skeptics do not expect the computer presence to make much difference in how people learn and think. I have formulated a number of possible explanations for why they think as they do. In some cases I think the skeptics might conceive of education and the effect of computers

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on it too narrowly. Instead of considering general cultural effects, they focus attention on the use of the computer as a device for programmed instruction. Skeptics then conclude that while the computer might produce some improvements in school learning, it is not likely to lead to fundamental change. In a sense, too, I think the skeptical view derives from a failure to appreciate just how

much Piagetian learning takes place as a child grows up. If a person conceives of children's intellectual development (or, for that matter, moral or social development) as deriving chiefly from deliberate teaching, then such a person would be likely to underestimate the potential effect that a massive presence of computers and other interactive objects might have on children.

The critics, on the other hand, do think that the computer presence will make a difference and are apprehensive. For example, they fear that more communication via computers might lead to less human association and result in social fragmentation. As knowing how to use a computer becomes increasingly necessary to effective social and economic participation, the position of the underprivileged could worsen, and the computer could exacerbate existing class distinctions. As to the political effect computers will have, the critics' concerns resonate with Orwellian images of a 1984 where home computers will form part of a complex system of surveillance and thought control. Critics also draw attention to potential mental health hazards of computer penetration. Some of these hazards are magnified forms of problems already worrying many observers of contemporary life; others are problems of an essentially new kind. A typical example of the former kind is that our grave ignorance of the psychological impact of television becomes even more serious when we contemplate an epoch of super TV. The holding power and psychological impact of the television show could be increased by varying the content to suit the tastes of each individual viewer, and by the show becoming interactive, drawing the viewer into the action. Critics already cite cases of students spending sleepless nights riveted to the computer terminal, coming to neglect both studies and social contact.

In the category of new problems, critics have pointed to the influence of the allegedly mechanized thought processes on how people think. Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message" might apply here: If the medium is an interactive system that takes in words and speaks back like a person, it is easy to get the message that machines are like people and that people are like machines. What this might do to the development of values and self image in growing children is hard to assess. But it is not hard to see reasons for worry.

Despite these concerns I am essentially optimistic—some might say utopian—about the effects of computers on society. I do not dismiss the arguments of the critics. On the contrary, I too see the computer presence as a potent influence on the human mind. I am very much aware of the holding power of an inter-

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active computer and of how taking the computer as a model can influence the way we think about ourselves. In fact the work on LOGO to which I have devoted much of the past ten years consists precisely of developing such forces in positive directions. For example, the critic is horrified at the thought of a child hypnotically held by a futuristic, computerized super pinball machine. In the LOGO work we have invented versions of such machines in which powerful ideas from physics or mathematics or linguistics are imbedded in such a way that permits the player to learn them in a natural fashion, analogous to how a child learns to speak. The computer's "holding power," so feared by critics, becomes a useful educational tool. Or take another, more profound example. The critic is afraid that children will adopt the computer as model and eventually come to "think mechanically" themselves. Following the opposite tack, I have invented ways to take educational advantage of the opportunities to master the art of deliberately thinking like a computer, according, for example, to the stereotype of a computer program that proceeds in a step-by-step, literal, mechanical fashion. There are situations where this style of thinking is appropriate and useful. Some children's difficulties in learning formal subjects such as grammar or mathematics derive from their inability to see the point of such a style.

A second educational advantage is indirect but ultimately more important. By deliberately learning to imitate mechanical thinking, the learner becomes able to articulate what mechanical thinking is and what it is not. The exercise can lead to greater confidence about the ability to choose a cognitive style that suits the problem. Analysis of "mechanical thinking" and how it is different from other kinds and practice with problem analysis can result in a new degree of intellectual sophistication. By providing a very concrete, down to earth model of a particular style of thinking work with the computer can make it easier to understand that there is such a thing as a "style of thinking." And giving children the opportunity to choose one style or another provides an opportunity to develop the skill necessary to choose between styles. Thus instead of inducing mechanical thinking, contact with computers could turn out to be the best conceivable antidote to it. And for me what is most important in this is that through these experiences these children would be serving their apprenticeship as epistemologists, that is to say learning to think articulately about thinking.

The intellectual environments offered to children by today's cultures are poor in opportunities to bring their thinking about thinking into the open, to learn to

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talk about it and test their ideas by externalizing them. Access to computers can dramatically change this situation. Even the simplest Turtle work can open new opportunities for sharpening one's thinking about thinking: Programming the Turtle begins by making one reflect

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on how one does oneself what one would like the Turtle to do. Thus teaching the Turtle to act or to "think" can lead one to reflect on one's own actions and thinking. And as children move on, they program the computer to make more complex decisions and find themselves engaged in reflecting on more complex aspects of their own thinking.

In short, while the critic and I share the belief that working with computers can

have a powerful influence on how people think, I have turned my attention to exploring how this influence could be turned in positive directions.

The central open questions about the effect of computers on children in the 1980s are these: Which people will be attracted to the world of computers, what talents will they bring, and what tastes and ideologies will they impose on the growing computer culture? I have observed children in LOGO environments engaged in self-referential discussions about their own thinking. This could happen because the LOGO language and the Turtle were designed by people who enjoy such discussion and worked hard to design a medium that would encourage it. Other designers of computer systems have different tastes and different ideas about what kinds of activities are suitable for children. Which design will prevail, and in what sub-culture, will not be decided by a simple bureaucratic decision made, for example, in a government Department of Education or by a committee of experts. Trends in computer style will emerge from a complex web of decisions by foundations with resources to support one or another design, by corporations who may see a market, by schools, by individuals who decide to make their career in the new

Computer Cultures, continued...

field of activity, and by children who will have their own say in what they pick up and what they make of it. People often ask whether in the future children will program computers or become absorbed in pre-programmed activities. The answer must be that some children will do the one, some the other, some both, and some neither. But which children, and most importantly, which social classes of children, will fall into each category will be influenced by the kind of computer activities and the kind of environments created around them.

As an example, we consider an activity which may not occur to most people when they think of computers and children: the use of the computer as a writing instrument. For me, writing means making a rough draft and refining it over a considerable period of time. My image of myself as a writer includes the expectation of an "unacceptable" first draft that will develop with successive editing into presentable form. But I would not be able to afford this image if I were a third grader. The physical act of writing would be slow and laborious. I would have no secretary. For most children rewriting a text is so laborious that the first draft is the final copy, and the skill of rereading with a critical eye is never developed. This changes dramatically when children have access to computers capable of manipulating text. The first draft is composed at the keyboard. Corrections are made easily. The current copy is always neat and tidy. I have seen children move from total rejection of writing to an intense involvement (accompanied by rapid improvement of quality) within a few weeks of beginning to write with a computer. Even more dramatic changes are seen when the child has physical handicaps that make writing by hand more than usually difficult or even impossible.

This use of computers is rapidly being adopted wherever adults write for a living. Most newspapers now provide their staff with "word processing" computer systems. Many writers who work at home are acquiring their own computers, and the computer terminal is steadily displacing the typewriter as the secretary's basic tool. The image of children using the computer as a writing instrument is a particularly good example of my thesis that what is good for professionals is good for children. But this image of how the computer might contribute to children's mastery of language is dramatically opposed to the one that is taking root in most elementary schools. There the computer is seen as a teaching instrument. It gives children practice in distinguishing between verbs and nouns, in spelling, and in answering multiple choice questions about the meaning of pieces of text. As I see it, this difference

is not a matter of a small and technical choice between two teaching strategies. It reflects a fundamental difference in educational philosophies. More to the point, it reflects a difference in view on the nature of childhood. I believe that the computer as writing instrument offers children an opportunity to become more like adults, indeed like advanced professional adults, in their relationship to their intellectual products and to themselves. In doing so, it comes into head-on collision with the many aspects of school whose effect, if not whose intention, is to "infantilize" the child.

Word processors can make a child's experience of writing more like that of a real writer. But this can be undermined if the adults surrounding the child fail to appreciate what it is like to be a writer. For example, it is only too easy to imagine adults, including teachers, expressing the view that editing and re-editing a text is a waste of time ("Why don't you get on to something new?" or "You aren't making it any better, why don't you fix your spelling?").

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As with writing, so with music making, games of skill, complex graphics, whatever: The computer is not a culture unto itself but it can serve to advance very different cultural and philosophical outlooks. For example, one could think of the Turtle as a device to teach elements of the traditional curriculum, such as notions of angle, shape, and coordinate systems. And in fact, most teachers who consult me about its use are trying to use it in this way. Of course the Turtle can help in the teaching of traditional curriculum, but I have thought of it as a vehicle for Piagetian learning, which to me is learning without curriculum.

There are those who think about creating a "Piagetian curriculum" or "Piagetian teaching methods." But to my mind these phrases and the activities they represent are contradictions in terms. I see Piaget as the theorist of learning without curriculum and the theorist of the kind of learning that happens without deliberate teaching. To turn him into the theorist of a new curriculum is to stand

him on his head.

But "teaching without curriculum" does not mean spontaneous, free form classrooms or simply "leaving the child alone." It means supporting children as they build their own intellectual structures with materials drawn from the surrounding culture. In this model, educational intervention means changing the culture, planting new constructive elements in it and eliminating noxious ones. This is a more ambitious undertaking than introducing a curriculum change, but one which is feasible under conditions now emerging.

Suppose that thirty years ago an educator had decided that the way to solve the problem of mathematics education was to arrange for a significant fraction of the population to become fluent in (and enthusiastic about) a new mathematical language. The idea might have been good in principle, but in practice it would have been absurd. No one had the power to implement it. Now things are different. Many millions of people are learning programming languages for reasons that have nothing to do with the education of children. Therefore, it becomes a practical proposition to influence the form of the languages they learn and the likelihood that their children will pick up these languages.

Throughout the course of this chapter I have been talking about the ways in which choices made by educators, foundations, governments, and private individuals can affect the potentially revolutionary changes in how children learn. But making good choices is not always easy, in part because past choices can often haunt us. There is a tendency for the first usable, but still primitive, product of a new technology to dig itself in. I have called this phenomenon the QWERTY phenomenon.

The top row of alphabetic keys of the standard typewriter reads QWERTY. For me this symbolizes the way in which technology can all too often serve not as a force for progress but for keeping things stuck. The QWERTY arrangement has no rational explanation, only a historical one. It was introduced in response to a problem in the early days of the typewriter: The keys used to jam. The idea was to minimize the collision problem by separating those keys that followed one another frequently. Just a few years later, general improvements in the technology removed the jamming problem, but QWERTY stuck. Once adopted, it resulted in many millions of typewriters and a method (indeed a full blown curriculum) for learning typing. The social cost of change (For example, putting the most used keys together on the keyboard) mounted with the vested interest created by the fact that so many fingers now knew how to follow the

Computer Cultures, continued...

QWERTY keyboard. QWERTY has stayed on despite the existence of other, more "rational" systems. On the other hand, if you talk to people about the QWERTY arrangement they will justify it by "objective" criteria. They will tell you that it "optimizes this" or it "minimize that." Although these justifications have no rational foundation, they illustrate a process, a social process, of myth construction that allows us to build a justification for primitivity into any system. I think we are well on the road to doing exactly the same thing with the computer. We are in the process of digging ourselves into an anachronism by preserving practices that have no rational basis beyond their historical roots in an earlier period of technological and theoretical development.

The use of computers for drill and practice is only one example of the QWERTY phenomenon in the computer domain. Another example occurs even when attempts are made to allow students to learn to program the computer. Learning to program a computer involves learning a "programming language." There are many such languages—for example, Fortran, Pascal, Basic, Smalltalk, and Lisp, and the lesser known language LOGO, which our group has used in most of our experiments with computers and children. A powerful QWERTY phenomenon is to be expected when we choose the language in which children are to learn to program computers. I shall argue in detail that the issue is consequential. A programming language is like a natural, human language in that it favors certain metaphors, images, and ways of thinking. It would seem to follow that educators interested in using computers and sensitive to cultural influences would pay particular attention to the choice of language. But nothing of the sort has happened. On the contrary, educators, too timid in technological matters or too ignorant to attempt to influence the languages offered by computer manufacturers, have accepted certain programming languages in much the same way as they accepted the QWERTY keyboard. An informative example is the way in which the programming language Basic has established itself as the obvious language to use in teaching American children how to program computers. The relevant technical information is this: A very small computer can be made to understand Basic, while other languages demand more from the computer. Thus, in the early days when computer power was extremely expensive, there was a genuine technical reason for the use of Basic, particularly in schools where budgets were always tight. Today, and in fact for several years now, the cost of computer memory has fallen to the point where any remaining economic ad-

vantages of using Basic are insignificant. Yet in most high schools, the language remains almost synonymous with programming, despite the existence of other computing languages that are demonstrably easier to learn and are richer in

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the intellectual benefits that can come from learning them. The situation is paradoxical. The computer revolution has scarcely begun, but it is already breeding its own conservatism. Looking more closely at Basic provides a window on how a conservative social system appropriates and tries to neutralize a potentially revolutionary instrument.

Basic is to computation what QWERTY is to typing. Many teachers

have learned Basic, many books have been written about it, many computers have been built in such a way that Basic is "hardwired" into them. In the case of the typewriter, we noted how people invent "rationalizations to justify the status quo." In the case of Basic, the phenomenon has gone much further, to the point where it resembles ideology formation. Complex arguments are invented to justify features of Basic that were originally included because the primitive technology demanded them or because alternatives were not well enough known at the time the language was designed.

An example of Basic ideology is the argument that Basic is easy to learn because it has a very small vocabulary. Its small vocabulary can be learned quickly enough. But using it is a different matter. Programs in Basic acquire so labyrinthine a structure that only the most motivated and brilliant ("mathematical") children do learn to use it for more than trivial ends.

One might ask why the teachers do not notice the difficulty children have in learning Basic. The answer is simple: Most teachers do not expect high performance from most students, especially in a domain of work that appears to be as "mathematical" and "formal" as programming. Thus the culture's general perception of mathematics as inaccessible

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Computer Cultures, continued...

ble bolsters the maintenance of Basic, which in turn confirms these perceptions. Moreover, the teachers are not the only people whose assumptions and prejudices feed into the circuit that perpetuates Basic. There are also the computerists, the people in the computer world who make decisions about which languages their computers will speak. These people, generally engineers, find Basic quite easy to learn, partly because they are accustomed to learning such very technical systems and partly because Basic's sort of simplicity appeals to their system of values. Thus, a particular subculture, one dominated by computer engineers, is influencing the world of education to favor those school students who are most like that subculture. The process is tacit, unintentional: It has never been publicly articulated, let alone evaluated. In all of these ways, the social embedding of Basic has far more serious consequences than the "digging in" of QWERTY.

There are many other ways in which the attributes of the subcultures involved with computers are being projected onto the world of education. For example, the idea of the computer as an instrument for drill and practice that appeals to teachers because it resembles traditional teaching methods also appeals to the engineers who design computer systems: Drill and practice applications are predictable, simple to describe, efficient in use of the machine's resources. So the best engineering talent goes into the development of computer systems that are biased to favor this kind of application. The bias operates subtly. The machine designers do not actually decide what will be done in the classrooms. That is done by teachers and occasionally even by carefully controlled research experiments. But there is an irony in these controlled experiments. They are very good at telling whether the small effects seen in best scores are real or due to chance. But they have no way to measure the undoubtedly real (and probably more massive) biases built into the machines.

We have already noted that the conservative bias being built into the use of computers in education has also been built into other new technologies. The first use of the new technology is quite naturally to do in a slightly different way that had been done before without it. It took years before designers of automobiles accepted the idea that they were cars, not "horseless carriages," and the precursors of modern motion pictures were plays acted as if before a live audience but actually in front of a camera. A whole generation was needed for the new art of motion pictures to emerge as something quite different from a linear mix of theater plus photography. Most of what has been done up to now in the name of "educational technology" or "computers

in education" is still at the stage of the linear mix of old instructional methods with new technologies.

We are at a point in the history of education when radical change is possible, and the possibility for that change is directly tied to the impact of the computer. Today what is offered in the educational "market" is largely determined by what is acceptable to a sluggish and conservative system. But this is where the computer presence is in the process of creating an environment for change. Consider the conditions under which a new educational idea can be put into practice today and in the near future. Let us suppose that today I have an idea about how children could learn mathematics more effectively and more humanely. And let us suppose that I have been able to persuade a million people that the idea is a good one. For many products such a potential market would guarantee success. Yet in the world of

**Basic is to computation
what QWERTY is
to typing.**

education today this would have little clout: A million people across the nation would still mean a minority in every town's school system, so there might be no effective channel for the million voices to be expressed. Thus, not only do good educational ideas sit on the shelves, but the process of invention is itself stymied. This inhibition of invention in turn influences the selection of people who get involved in education. Very few with the imagination, creativity, and drive to make great new inventions enter the field. Most of those who do are soon driven out in frustration. Conservatism in the world of education has become a self-perpetuating social phenomenon.

Fortunately, there is a weak link in the vicious circle. Increasingly, the computers of the near future will be the private property of individuals, and this will gradually return to the individual the power to determine patterns of education. Education will become more of a private act, and people with good ideas, different ideas, exciting ideas will no longer be faced with a dilemma where they either have to "sell" their ideas to a conservative bureaucracy or shelve them. They will be able to offer them in an open marketplace directly to consumers. There will be new opportunities for imagination and originality. There might be a renaissance of thinking about education. □