

## THE HUMANIST AND MULTIMEDIA: EDUCATION VS. ENTERTAINMENT

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In the course of our humanities briefings at the IAT (Institute for Academic Technology), demonstrations of multimedia materials generate a lot of interest—and a lot of questions. In spite of the acknowledged educational potential of information technologies, thoughtful scholars still question the need for increased use of images, graphics and sound for educational materials. What follows are some of the issues raised by those who wonder if change is necessary. The answers reflect a personal perspective on the issues raised.

*The word "media" is already plural. Why tack on "multi"?*

The term is being used to designate presentations that combine elements of print, sound, graphics and still or full-motion images on a personal computer. (Some prefer the term "compound document.") The word "multimedia" originated in the commercial world.

*Doesn't that bother you?*

Yes and no. I would hate for this technology to import uncritically the techniques used for advertising and entertainment into the educational arena. On the other hand, the humanist in me is delighted to see the spectrum of educational tools broadened to include more elements from the fine arts. Compound documents are extremely rich in educative content, and it's exciting to see how elements of composition and graphic design are being implemented

for instruction.

*OK, but what makes these compound documents more interesting than illustrated books, or slide shows or films?*

The computer makes it possible for the learner to make choices that determine both the kind of material presented and the rate of information flow. Hypertext (and now hypermedia) documents open up the ability to follow relationships among ideas. Timely access to relevant information is intellectually arousing for the student. These features create a learning environment where the student can interact with the material.

*Don't learners interact with traditional media?*

Yes, but not in the same way. Traditional formats present information in linear or narrative form. The student experiences what is called "reception" learning. The computer can go beyond this and present information in associative or relational form, when appropriate. An interactive format makes it possible for the presentation of information to occur under natural conditions of inquiry, that is, when the learner has framed a question and is receptive to the answer. The student can more fully experience "discovery" learning.

*Books are cheap and effective. Why would we want to replace print as a primary educational medium?*

It's the presupposition that fails. I don't see computers replacing books at all. Literacy did not replace orality, nor is it the case that other media will replace print.

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Literacy remains a primary goal of education, but it's not the only goal. The current concern with our educational system is that it provides neither a broad understanding of the world we live in nor meaningful skills to make a living. The interest in multimedia comes from its promise in general education when coupled with effective training.

*Won't multimedia instructional materials blur the distinction between education and entertainment?*

I suppose the "blurring" has always been there. All of us have seen dramatic representations that educate; and we've all been to lectures that entertain. But that doesn't mean that they are the same thing. Entertainment aims at winning immediate audience approval and is driven directly by a for-profit motive. The educational establishment is basically a not-for-profit enterprise. The process of education often requires students to postpone immediate gratification for long-term achievement, and is driven by a sense of responsibility for the student and for society. Ultimately, the worth of multimedia materials will be judged along traditional educational goals, I believe, with professional educators guarding the gates.

*Won't teachers be replaced by the computers?*

No. The new technology is giving wider access to information to larger numbers of students. Teachers will be more important than ever in the process of helping students make knowledge from information. They will continue to validate the worth of learning for the individual. It is true, however, that the task of simple information delivery may be taken over by the new technology.

*What evidence is there that professional educators will be interested in creating multimedia educational materials?*

It's a bit early in the game to speak of "evidence," but there are some positive indications that scholars find the new technological environment interesting. Many report that they can share primary observed data with their students and provide the tools for performing operations on the data. This gives the feel of a more authentic learning environment and lessens the contrast between teaching and research. It is very satisfying for educators to demonstrate to others the personal interest that their subject matter holds.

*Can we afford to get involved with this stuff?*

Can we afford not to? Historians already are speaking of the "post-industrial" society, of the "information age." Access to information has always been essential to people in the knowledge business. If the educational establishment cannot afford information technology, then this technology will remain the province of the for-profit sector. It's not clear to me how the educational establishment will survive if it fails to invest in information technology.

*Any chance I can safely retire before having to deal with all this?*

I doubt it. The "information explosion" is real, and we already are seeing increased anxiety on the part of our students as they try to sort out what is important and what is not in their own lives. The issue is equally important for our own professional survival, and that means we have to understand information technology. I'd like to see more—not fewer—seasoned educators addressing the issues of meaningful learning in the information age.