



FROM THE PRESIDENT

The slogan on the advance flyer for EDUCOM '93 read in large letters "Technology isn't the Point." I was intrigued and encouraged. After all, this is a big conference with major poobahs of the technology world, people who talk seriously about information superhighways and network nodes and digital this and that over breakfast. And yet here was their conference flyer emblazoned with one of my own mantras: "Technology isn't the Point." Maybe that just meant that at this conference, like at most others, people would tend to spend most of their time off-topic: refreshing old friendships while circulating and schmoozing to make new ones? Nah, they wouldn't really need to publicize that—must be something else.

I resolved to go. After all, if they've discovered what the Point is, someone needs to make sure the rest of us find out, too.

Most of the sessions were about technology, of course, and its myriad uses and misuses, promises and possibilities. Nevertheless, after three days, two experiences stood out as possibly carrying the message I'd gone to uncover—the elusive Point. The first had nothing whatever to do with technology and everything to do with group dynamics and purposefulness. I attended the two-day EUIT (Educational Uses of

Information Technology) preconference working sessions. Growing out of relatively informal get-togethers, EUIT is really an irreverent, grass-roots effort that over the years has developed a series of projects to address specific needs regarding the integration of technology into the curriculum. It was exciting to watch the process in action: people get together, identify areas of common concern and common interest, brainstorm over several days ways they can address the issues and then make an informal plan to stay in touch and follow up after the conference. Often these follow-ups have led to official proposals to EDUCOM for funding, while others have simply enabled different groups to solve together what they had been unable to solve separately. This is great, I thought; no Agenda, no Plan; just get the right people together, get out of the way and exciting things can happen. I took notes feverishly thinking about how one of our IALL conferences might facilitate this same process. I still think this, even though I learned later that the October conference would be EUIT's last official meeting. Instead of providing support for ideas bubbling up from the EUIT group, the EDUCOM board had decided to direct some initiatives of its own. There is this technology, you see, powerful but expensive; and apparently in need of a problem which it is perfectly suited to solve. Curious, I thought,

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when most of us are scratching our heads, desperate to find a way to get colleagues involved and interested, why would an organization ever decide to squash a dynamic, bottom-up process in order to substitute a top-down model? Several useful lessons here about how organizations can help individuals make a difference, and how they can sometimes choose to simply shoot themselves in the foot.

The second experience was listening to the point-counterpoint exchange between Lewis Perelman (*School's Out: Hyperlearning, the New Technology and the End of Education*) and Neil Postman (*Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*). The polish of the confrontation suggested that the two had done similar presentations elsewhere, but this time Postman was the better speaker. "What is the problem," he asked, pointing to now one, now another technological breakthrough, "to which this is the answer?" The question stayed in my head for the rest of the conference. I'm not anti-technology, nor is Postman for that matter. But there's no doubt that technology can be a dangerous distraction, diverting our attention from where the actual problems in our political, social, commercial and educational enterprises lie. Technology can be seductive, suggesting to us that we are working constructively toward a solution before we've really defined the problem, much less decided if it's worth solving in the first place. Perelman argued that the error lies in connecting technology exclusively to problem solving. After all, he said, waxing poetic, "technology is one of the most defining of all human characteristics—what makes us as a species uniquely different from all other forms of life that we know of is that we are the creatures that do technology. And not merely in the simplistic sense

of using tools—because there are other animals that use tools—but so far as we know, we are the only species that improves its tools, that once it's found one starts going about how to make it better." Fan of Tim Allen and ABC's "Home Improvement" though I am (told you I wasn't antitechnology), I don't find the argument about creating something simply because we can as compelling as I might have once. Like before, Postman's question began ringing in my head: "What is the problem to which this technology is the answer?"

Whether we start with a problem and look for the answer or create an answer and start looking for the problem, we might be well advised to think soberly about where and why technology "fits" in the process.

By the way, it turns out I was right about the schmoozing and that some of the most memorable moments of the conference might happen outside the official sessions. Personally, one of my high points was meeting Jack Horner at a booth in the exhibit area. For those of you who don't follow dinosaurs in the news, Horner is the tall, handsome Montana paleontologist who most consider the model for the hero of Jurassic Park. "Do you know what that is?" he asked me as I peered at a 3D graphic of a dinosaur skull on the computer workstation in the booth. "Sure," I answered, trying to sound nonchalant, "it's a hadrosaur." And then spoiled the effect by blurting "I watch you on TV all the time."

