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Tubal Cain and All That

[Peter Wilkinson\(1\)](#)

A new journal arrives in the mail and, I'm sorry to say, gets the same treatment as most of the others. That is to say, I quickly skim read for things which might be useful to me, and then finding nothing, file it with the others. ("Useful" at 3:30 p.m. on a Tuesday means something I can incorporate into my lesson tomorrow which will help a kid learn better). On this occasion I find myself more disappointed and irritated with this state of affairs than usual. Mainly this is because it reinforces an impression gathered when I attended my first ITEA Conference in Dallas. At that time I circulated madly and spoke to everyone I could pin into a corner, searching for ideas to bring a new relevancy and value to my own program and philosophy. Until the third day it was virtually impossible to find a teacher, a front-line-trenches genuine school teacher. Almost everyone was a "Teacher Educator" and almost all of them were advocating a similar philosophy -- get out of "projects" and into "problem solving" and "technology," as though both of these were new ideas and had not been taught before. "High-tech" was the new wave, with advanced computer hardware and software, CAD systems and robotics, etc. -- things generally far beyond the budget in my school. I heard comments about "turning your paint room into a clean room" and other strange things. I found it altogether very disappointing and somewhat frustrating. Where were the people like me at this ITEA conference? The answer

came a day later, when real-life teachers arrived (you could tell them by the lack of blue pinstriped suits and the generally different air about them as they strolled through the foyer in groups supporting one another -- I knew the feeling well!).

When I met and talked to these people I found a very different reality. Many were still in the old "unit shops," had either an old Apple or no computers at all, and almost no budget. In short they were either worse off or in the same state as me. I asked about the "new" technology and they all laughed wryly, bitterly, and sometimes loud and long. The situation in most areas seems to be that there are a few schools in major centers, generally close to universities, where funds for "high tech" have been made available. But, they themselves were still managing with largely the same old equipment and the same minimal budgets as always, because there had simply been no injection of new funds to make changes and purchase new equipment. However I found that the failure to change to the newer ideas was invariably presumed to be the reluctance of teachers to "get out of the old comfortable rut." Somehow we have a reality gap, and politicians are being given a perfect cop-out.

It also seems to me that we have somehow lost the bridge between academic research, philosophical theorizing and the actual realities of the practice of teaching. Faculties of education used to be that bridge. They took the academic research and theory and operationalized it; they translated the theory into simple terms. They made it understandable and useable for the practitioner. Today I find the jargon almost unintelligible even with some 11 years of university education. I have no quarrel with jargon and am fully aware of its value both for a description and identification, but it seems that unless one is actively involved with a university, much of the research literature

is almost totally incomprehensible. For most teachers the task of keeping totally abreast of current writing and research is almost impossible. Distance and workloads are just two of the factors involved. Am I right in thinking that "education" in universities has now truly become just one of the other "sciences" and so no longer needs a practical end goal -- research is done for the sake of pure research? This is obviously a legitimate philosophy, but someone had better form a new university department to do what faculties of education used to do -- bridge that gap. Thankfully there were also a few speakers at Dallas, the quartz-halogen highlights of those few days, who renewed me in my own search for excellence and spurred me on. I thank them with all my heart. I wish we could clone them.

This all came to my mind as I read your instructions for the submission of articles. To be frank I have no access to a system using either IBM, Macintosh or WordPerfect, I also can't give you anything in ASCII format. I have an old Apple of 10 year vintage -- and consider myself fortunate in that respect. It is in use most of the hours the school is open. Your writers, I'm afraid, will all have to be from universities or the richer (and urban?) school divisions - and what that will do to the whole cause of technology education in North America I leave to your imagination. If change is indeed necessary, and I believe we really can do better, the change will come about by field teachers being challenged and educated and inspired to do better. "Teacher educators" will have to do much more than write obscure journal articles to produce that inspiration -- however brilliant the research or quality of thought. They have to teach on the same planet as I -- to 32 grade eight students at 9:00 a.m. Monday morning.

I do know why I teach what I teach. I am fortunate in that we have been in a total

multiple activity environment in Alberta since the 1960's. The curricular freedom built into that system has produced many innovative programs in this province, each bearing the individual stamp of the multitude of personalities and experiences involved. I have yet to see a better system for allowing teachers, professionals in their own right, to teach what they know and to inspire learning in their students.

In short, I teach children, taking individuals from where they are into new discoveries about themselves and the world. I use simulations and projects (so often decried in "scholarly" writings) and I usually find they work for me if I put enough effort and planning into them. I do hope that someone understands this plea - like all rural teachers I spend most of my teaching year without others in my specialization to "rap" with. It can get lonely and frustrating and I wonder what will happen if/when my own store of innovation dries up.

I am also very afraid that the profession once again is being "set-up" by politicians. It could be that I am growing too cynical but this is exactly what happened in the days of "Sputnik," remember? The reason given for the west being behind the USSR was that educators weren't doing what they should have been and education had to be fixed. Well now North America is "behind" Japan and WE are again expected to correct that situation by changing what WE do -- and without any extra funding this time you will notice. The task may well be forever outside of our control. Beware the revenge if we accept this precept, climb high on the bandwagon of "high tech" and yet, in the end, fail to restore the forever lost advantage.

Please find room in your journal to highlight some of the innovative real programs which are out there. We all have access to scholarly papers, and they certainly do have their crucial part to play, but I

have yet to find a source describing new practical ideas actually working and the philosophies and personalities behind them. I want to be able to write and interact with those leaders in the classroom so that we can all build upon a shared experience and not continue to work alone, hunting and pecking in isolation.

Editor's note: the JTE does in fact accept manuscripts that are not on floppy disk (as we did this one). Since most people now use word processors for their work, it makes sense to take advantage of the "electronic" version of the manuscript, rather than rekeying it. So far, this approach is working very well... And exceptions will be made where necessary.

A number of excellent sources for new ideas directed toward secondary level classroom teachers are listed and described in Llitowitz's article, "Writing for Technology Education Publications," published elsewhere in this issue. The JTE is admittedly (and intentionally) directed more toward technology teacher educators than toward secondary technology educators.

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