

BREAKING DOWN THE DIGITAL WALLS: LEARNING TO TEACH IN A POST-MODEM WORLD

By R.W. Burniske & Lowell Monke (2001)

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Breaking Down the Digital Walls: Learning to Teach in a Post-Modem World by R.W. Burniske and Lowell Monke. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 284 pages, \$20.95).

This is a thoughtful and valuable book. It explores some extremely creative ways of working with computer-based information exchanges, what the authors call “telecommunicating,” to extend the high school classroom into international exchange of information and finally into a mutual searching for answers to important questions. They also use permutations of the word, “telecollaborating” to describe cooperative ventures between classrooms, and “telecomputing” to describe the technical infrastructure required for such efforts to succeed. What they describe are the marvelous possibilities that have opened to the classroom teacher with the advent of e-mail

and the Web, having exploited those possibilities in their classrooms for over a decade.

The authors describe how they met as overseas teachers working at an international school in Quito, Ecuador, in 1987. Their conversations at a small, nondescript café in Colombia, the Manabi Hut, led directly to the ongoing project projects of collaboration and eventually to the writing of this book. They consider their projects to be examples of “telecommunicating,” where classes in different countries can link electronically to engage in meaningful dialog about issues of mutual concern. In a way, their book is a prime example of telecommunicating, written simultaneously from different parts of the globe. It is useful to remember that Burniske is an English teacher, while Monke teaches math and computer science.

Their position in writing the book is as teachers who use computers, who are both lovers and critics of computers in the classroom.

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They teach capable students and deal with the issues of meeting requirements for the International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement credit. They are both writers and lovers of the written word. Their conversations over e-mail are candid and enlightening. Monke is directly involved with computer programming, while Burniske is not, and in fact actively avoids it. What they are is powerful role models for teachers who care enough about their teaching their students to read widely, experiment in the classroom, and reflect in profound ways about it. In short, in my opinion, they are the role models for the ultimate secondary school teacher using technology.

WHAT IS TELECOMMUNICATING?

To give an early example of their collaborative work, as the South African elections were occurring in 1994, under the scrutiny of the entire world, they began a project to trace the events in the news from different countries and to examine trends. These teachers were able to link classrooms in Des Moines, Iowa (Lowell Monke), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia ("Buddy" Burniske) with two other schools; the International School of the Hague in Holland, and Lakeside School in Seattle, Washington, USA, as well as a number of individuals, some of them in South Africa. The drama of the event, as seen from multiple perspectives around the world, was unforgettable for the students and faculty involved.

While they realize that the "big event syndrome" could detract from the kind of interchange that classes could have on a regular basis, this experience with the South African elections showed them the power of telecollaboration in the high school classroom. The book describes additional telecommunicating projects: a Utopian Visions project where each school described what an ideal community would be like in their location a century in the future; a project looking at the impact of various forms of communication on perceptions of events called The Media Matter. In each case,

the backbone of the project is the link between classes taught by Burniske and Monke, in Malaysia and Iowa respectively, but joined by teachers and capable students on other continents as well.

The reality of the projects comes from quotations from actual correspondence between classes cited in the book. Generally, the classes are organized into teams, who conduct research and submit reports that are sent by the teacher to other participating classes across continents. The messages are composed with care, and with the coaching of a culturally sensitive teacher who can detect problems that might occur. Cultural blunders and adolescent insults can be avoided. Once a message is received, it is analyzed carefully as a class to draw out important lessons. By using the teacher as a filter for the messages, both going and coming, problems of computer access and, to some extent, the problem of delving into subjects that might be taboo for one or both cultures are handled. Working in this way avoids the danger of irate parents questioning why such conversations could go on in class.

These collaborative projects go on for more than a decade. As the technology evolves over time, additional computer resources make it possible for teams or individuals to communicate directly with each other, and this two-way interaction between students apparently becomes increasingly the mode. Monke notes that this direct communication has some dangers, and that "the sobering side of opportunity is responsibility." In taking that responsibility as a teacher, he sometimes feels at risk:

By 1995 my class had somehow taken on the characteristics of a perpetual pilot program among the technology decision-makers. Although officially no students were allowed direct Internet access for another three years, all of my supervisors carefully averted their eyes as I went about my business of experimenting with student e-mail and Web pages.

A dream it was, but one in which I also sensed a dark and threatening presence. I knew that if something went wrong, any-

thing at all, it was my neck that was in the noose. A bad case of PR paranoia had paralyzed my district's attempt to develop a student use policy, and although all of my supervisors were anxious for me to experiment with the Internet, it was also clear that I was walking a telecommunication high-wire without a legal or professional net. One slip, one public scandal, and my program and I would take a long fall. (p. 203)

While his partner in Malaysia, Buddy Burniske, gets undercut by administrators who arbitrarily cancel his class for the second semester, Monke has support, but with no real "safety net." It is a reminder that people who innovate encounter opposition from many quarters. These authors quote the adage: "You can tell the pioneers by the arrows in their backs." While there is occasional praise for innovation, besides dealing with the technical frustration of machine and software glitches, there are administrative structures and bureaucracy capable of thwarting all but the bravest of the brave.

WHAT IS MOST VALUABLE ABOUT THIS BOOK?

Here I have to get personal, to deal with the sections that spoke to me. I work in a higher education setting and, while I face similar constraints, the environment is different in many ways. While I do not read many books about high school education, one that I read that had a similar impact on my thinking was Ted Sizer's (1986) *Horace's Compromise*.

Breaking Down Digital Walls does a splendid job of describing working and innovating with technology in the high school setting. Aspects of this description include the limited autonomy of teachers under administrative pressure, the challenge of engaging adolescent minds, the pressures to objectify students as a kind of commodity and to please parents and community (the "stakeholders," an economic term they detest).

The internationalization of instruction gets a big boost with this kind of teaching, and that

is a theme that resonates for me. The change from pen pals over postal mail to "keypals" over the Internet is dramatic, with verbal exchanges possible within hours compared with weeks before. Teaching a course and obtaining input from sources on several continents is a heady prospect. This book shows how it can be done and suggests that a skillful teacher must help students realize that, even though the other students may seem to be part of the same global culture, major cultural differences still remain.

These two authors are strong characters in their own right. While chapters alternate with different voices, a helpful way of getting their very distinct perspectives, the character of each comes out clearly. The reader will probably find more affinity with one than the other. I did. Their friendship is most impressive, as it continues year after year to generate good ideas and meaningful dialog. It is a reminder of something I have always believed about international work: that to complete a successful project, the interpersonal dimension is key. If true friendship is in place, many obstacles to cooperation can be overcome. That the two appreciate and admire each other is evident. Here is the description of Buddy as seen by Lowell. In speaking of teachers' responsibility to recognize the worth of each individual student, Lowell states:

My experience with Buddy tells me that he will relinquish his claim on that responsibility when they throw dirt on his coffin. It is this sense of responsibility that was one of the major driving forces in his efforts to engage many of his students in telecollaboration while in Malaysia. Through telecollaboration he was able to liberate his students from what he recognized as the chokehold of a deadening curriculum and the information desert of a censorial political regime. (p. 205)

Buddy's description of Lowell portrays him also in heroic terms:

I admire people like Lowell Monke...the peaceful resistance fighters who fight the good fight, ironically challenging the value

of computers in education even while teaching in a computer-networked classroom. Such educators have taught me how to evaluate teachers, reducing my criteria to a single question: "Would I want this person to teach my own child?" (p. 265)

Their friendship is one of the more remarkable parts of the book, separated as they are by teaching different discipline areas, thousands of miles apart, and with infrequent face-to-face contacts. What is evident is that they are kindred spirits who breathe the same air of a liberated educator and who hold ideals for their classrooms that are remarkably similar.

Their insights into teaching are remarkable and are informed by education's critics like Neil Postman, Jacques Ellul, and Paolo Friere. They have wrestled with important issues, and they know how to separate out mindless technological churning from real thinking. Most importantly, they view teaching as a moral activity with real consequences every day. It is a sobering invitation to rethink one's own commitment to teaching and to reflect on the moral impact of everyday actions.

Some of their descriptions are remarkable. In several places in the book, Lowell Monke draws upon his own experience growing up on a farm. In an early chapter, he uses the farm analogy of the horse-drawn plow to show two things. One is the "stick to a technology until death" attitude of one of his neighbors, Louis Prien. He recounts how his father was displeased at his son's lack of sympathy for this neighbor.

My dad understood this [Louis' attachment to his mules and a prior generation's values] even though he never articulated it and may not have been able to. He may also have understood in his bones that increased mechanization was prying loose his sense of belonging to the land. I suspect this (along with the normal irritation caused by a know-it-all teenage son) was probably the thorn that was digging under his skin when he chastened me with uncharacteristic sharpness one day for making fun of how slowly Louie and his mules moved through the fields. My dad was a bridge between worlds, and though he accepted the benefits

and demands of the new one he could still appreciate what the old world offered—and wasn't at all pleased that his son could not. (p. 23)

Monke then uses a powerful analogy to talk about raw computer power and its impact on our society. He remembers an uncle who used to drive their workhorses to pull the plow. At the end of the day, the horses would simply head for the barn, and the young uncle would ride along as best he could, trying to avoid bumps, but really out of control. That is Monke's metaphor for how our society deals with technology in many instances. As we embrace a new technology like the computer, we give up some experiences that may have had value in the past and may still have value.

He cites dramatist Max Frisch as defining technology as "the knack of so arranging the world that we do not experience it" (p. 24).

...(M)odern technology conceals from us a vast array of relationships between ourselves and the fundamental processes and objects that lie beneath the things we encounter in our lives.... Just as trading the mules for a tractor increases the distance between the farmer and an intimate knowledge of the soil, the more complex the educational technology is, the farther removed we find ourselves from the object of study (p. 24).

Monke gives the example of a two-dimensional tree on a computer screen with the actual experience of a tree for a child: "peeling its bark, climbing its branches, sitting under its shade, jumping into its piled up leaves" (p. 25).

One of the most important roles for the teacher in the high tech classroom is to compensate for the computer's mechanistic tendencies; to assure that all "resources of self" are brought into the learning process. It is a task that can only be performed by a caring, thoughtful human being dedicated to elevating the inner life of each individual child. (p. 27)

This will call for a new role for teachers, in an era when technology cannot be ignored but

should not be embraced unthinkingly. It is not enough to buy the conventional wisdom of a teacher's being "A guide on the side, not a sage on the stage," because in turning over responsibility for teaching to some outside technology, the teacher loses opportunities to influence the moral enterprise of teaching.

This book will raise many questions and cause much reflection among both instructional technologists and teachers of youth. And it should. In places it gets long and tedious, but the dry stretches of desert are relieved by periodic oases of deep thought. I smiled at one place where Burniske acknowledges a certain tedium himself: "I'm weary of my own voice," he notes (p. 248). But the insights offered are

profound: that teaching is really about conveying humanistic values, that real learning is about people—who we are and how we think—while learning about the computer ought to take second place in our priorities. No reader will agree with every position taken, and there are points that I could certainly argue. But the important things come from their reflection and wisdom, built over their years of teaching. This is a book that I strongly recommend to instructional technologists and distance education practitioners, providing both an international and a thoughtful perspective on what is possible in today's wired (post-modern) classroom.