

.....

## COMPUTERS/DISTANCE LEARNING

.....

.....

### Should Schools Be Wired to the Internet?

*No—Learn First, Surf Later*

David Gelernter

This selection first appeared in *Time* on 25 May 1998. David Gelernter is a professor of computer science at Yale University.

Quack medicine comes in two varieties: “irrelevant but harmless” and “toxic.” The Administration’s plan to wire American classrooms for Internet service is toxic quackery. Four-fifths of U.S. schools have Internet access already; instead of wiring the rest, we ought to lay down a startling new educational directive: First learn reading and writing, history and arithmetic. Then play Frisbee, go fishing, or surf the Internet. Lessons first, fun second.

I’ve used the Internet nearly every day since September 1982. It’s a great way to gather information, communicate, and shop. And in one sense, the Internet is good for the American mind. Up through the early ‘90s, everyday written communication seemed to be dying out. Thanks to e-mail and fax machines, writing has come back. In this respect, the Internet could be a fine teaching tool—a way to share good, scarce writing teachers. One teacher could manage a whole district of students if they were all connected electronically.

But the push to net-connect every school is an educational disaster in the making. Our schools are in crisis. Statistics prove what I see every day as a parent and a college educator. My wife and I have a constant struggle to get our young boys to master the basic skills they need and our schools hate to teach. As a college teacher, I see the sorry outcome:

students who can't write worth a damn, who lack basic math and language skills. Our schools are scared to tell students to sit down and shut up and learn; drill it, memorize it, because you must master it whether it's fun or not. Children pay the price for our educational cowardice.

I've never met one parent or teacher or student or principal or even computer salesman who claimed that insufficient data is the root of the problem. With an Internet connection, you can gather the latest stuff from all over, but too many American high school students have never read one Mark Twain novel or Shakespeare play or Wordsworth poem, or a serious history of the U.S.; they are bad at science, useless at mathematics, hopeless at writing—but if they could only connect to the latest websites in Passaic and Peru, we'd see improvement? The Internet, said President Clinton in February, “could make it possible for every child with access to a computer to stretch a hand across a keyboard to reach every book ever written, every painting ever painted, every symphony ever composed.” Pardon me, Mr. President, but this is demented. Most American children don't know what a symphony is. If we suddenly figured out how to teach each child one movement of one symphony, that would be a miracle.

And our skill-free children are overwhelmed by information even without the Internet. The glossy magazines and hundred-odd cable channels, the videotapes and computer CDs in most libraries and many homes—they need more information? It's as if the Administration were announcing that every child must have the fanciest scuba gear on the market—but these kids don't know how to swim, and fitting them out with scuba gear isn't just useless, it's irresponsible; they'll drown.

And it gets worse. Our children's attention spans are too short already, but the Web is a propaganda machine for short attention spans. The instant you get bored, click the mouse, and you're someplace else. Our children already prefer pictures to words, glitz to substance, fancy packaging to serious content. But the Web propagandizes relentlessly for glitz and pictures, for video and stylish packaging. And while it's full of first-rate information, it's also full of lies, garbage, and pornography so revolting you can't even describe it. There is no quality control on the Internet.

Still, imagine a well-run, serious school with an Internet hookup in the library for occasional use by students under supervision who are working on research projects; would that be so bad? No. Though it ranks around 944th on my list of important school improvements, it's not bad. But in reality, too many schools will use the Internet the same

way they use computers themselves: to entertain children at minimal cost to teachers. If children are turned loose to surf, then Internet in the schools won't be a minor educational improvement, it will be a major disaster. Another one. Just what we need.

---

## The Learning Revolution

Lewis J. Perelman

This selection is taken from *Market Liberalism: A Paradigm for the 21st Century*, edited by David Boaz and Edward H. Crane, published by the Cato Institute, 1993. Lewis Perelman is author of the best-selling book *School's Out* (Avon Books, 1993) and principal of the Perelman Group, a consulting firm.

The collapse of the Soviet empire is just one of the most dramatic symptoms of the dawn of the new knowledge-age economy. One of the most critical of the many profound impacts of the technological revolution is the global obsolescence of traditional education and training institutions. Prosperity in the new economy depends on a complete replacement of worn-out public policies that are intended to subsidize and "save" those institutions. The new policy paradigm must focus on (1) abolishing the wasteful paper chase for academic credentials and (2) commercializing (not just privatizing) the economy of academia, the biggest and probably the last great empire on earth.

### The New Economy

In the new economy being formed by explosive advances in information technologies, knowledge has become the crucial factor of production. Contrary to much of the conventional (and backward-looking) wisdom driving most recently proposed economic strategies, software has displaced manufacturing as the key to national economic strength, and learning has become the crucial form of work required for self-reliance and prosperity.