



Putting Technology in Its Place

by Constance A. Mellon

The sixth grade students who were gathered around the table in the sunny middle school library were big and boisterous, but as the librarian moved to the head of the table and lifted the book she held in her hands, they became quiet. Dramatically, her voice filled the room with the adventures of a dog named Shiloh, and the students hung on every word. The librarian is my friend, Lina Christopher, media coordinator at P.S. Jones Middle School in Washington, North Carolina. Her annual presentation of *Shiloh*, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, helps her sixth graders to develop a love of the library and a rapport with their librarian. This kind of experience should be a vital and valued part of library media programs, but as North Carolina and the nation continue to worship the great god Technology, it is the kind of experience that I am afraid may become available to fewer and fewer children until, at last, it disappears.

In the courses I teach at East Carolina University, I come into close contact with many media coordinators throughout eastern North Carolina, and the stories I hear worry me: book budgets slashed in favor of software, computer skills more valued than the ability to fascinate children with books, and library programs disrupted to allocate space for computer labs. Fortunately, the librarians with whom I work continue to value books and to recognize their importance in literacy and creative thinking. They hold book fairs to increase the size of their collections, they practice their skills in storytelling, booktalking, and reading aloud, and they spend hours of their own time working with motivational programs like Accelerated Reader and Battle of the Books. But the rewards and recognition they earn from book-related activities are often significantly less than those that come from Internet activities or computer troubleshooting.

I am certainly not *against* technology. Far from it. What does concern me, however, is the prevailing attitude among educators, many of whom hold both the power and the purse strings in public schools, that technology will solve all our educational problems. This attitude reminds me of the words of Thomas Edison, published in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* on July 9, 1913. Edison, discussing the new technology of the early 1900s — the motion picture — was quoted as saying, "Books will soon be obsolete in the schools. Scholars will be instructed through the eye. It is possible to teach every branch of human

knowledge with the motion picture. Our school system will be completely changed in ten years." Time proved Edison wrong, as it proved wrong similar claims made about videotape in the 1970s. Now these same claims are being made for computers. Perhaps we would do well to heed the message of Isaac Asimov's short story "The Fun They Had." Published more than twenty years ago, Asimov's story is set in a time when children are educated at home by computers and every lesson is designed specifically for each child. A young boy tells his friend about "the old days" when children all went to school together and learned the same things at the same time so they could discuss what they had learned. And his friend thinks longingly, "What fun they had."

Technology is an integral part of our society today, and we must acknowledge it as such. But computer technology will take its place in society in the same way that the automobile, the telephone, and television did. It will simply fade into the social background like those earlier technologies. In 1927, my mother announced Lindbergh's arrival in Paris over the crystal set radios tuned to the tiny broadcasting station where she worked. Twenty years later, she and her husband, with their young daughter, sat spellbound in front of their first television set. Forty-two years later, her daughter watched in amazement as the first man walked on the moon. Technology happens. But that same woman read aloud to her daughter from the time she was a baby, took her to the library every Saturday for story hour, and coaxed her into chores by telling family stories. Reading and imagination were valued in my home as they were in the schools and libraries in which I spent my youth. As a result, I can imagine a world given over to technology, a world where reading is a lost art and all information is accepted as equally reliable because it is easily accessible on the Information Highway. Education is far more than technological know-how. In the memorable words of Alan Kay of Apple Computer, Inc., "Any problem schools cannot solve without the computer, they can't solve with the computer." Let's not pretend they can.