Computer-assisted learning: Realization is a "tall order" . . .

Editor:

I read with much interest the article entitled "Into the 80's with Microcomputer-Based Learning" which appeared in the July 1980 issue. As an assistant professor in computer technology at Los Angeles City College, I can easily agree with the authors on several points. Courseware must be as transferable as possible, to avoid great expense; teachers themselves must be trained, or, at least, psychologically prepared, for the infusion of CAL that will affect all educators; administrators must be ready to accept the systems as routinely as paper and book orders, since the equipment will soon be prolific.

The one item which the authors did not address, and which I have observed to be the greatest problem with computer proliferation in our district, is the purely human one which I can only describe as "politics,"—that is, the choice of equipment, courseware, software, services, and presentation being made solely as a matter of personal choice of the person, be he teacher, chairperson, or administrator, to whom the choice of the spending of money happens to fall at the moment. The teacher who happens to have a Brand X personal computer at home will hear of no other type of equipment purchase for his department; Brand X is the one with which he is most familiar and is therefore the one he buys. Teachers who prefer something else will either have to accept the purchase and work with it, or, more likely, refuse to work with the equipment altogether. I have seen great quantities of time and money spent on equipment which goes virtually unused. I would speculate that the majority of money spent on microprocessor-based equipment to date in the educational field has been wasted as a result of the total lack of cooperation on the part of the educators amongst themselves to generate a unified, common effort in the buying and using of microprocessor-based systems, or any computer equipment, for that matter.

There are secondary impediments to CAL in the form of vendors who go out of business after delivery, leaving the educational institution high and dry; equipment, even from big, well-known companies, which simply doesn't work because of faulty software or poor hardware engineering; a total lack of understanding by the vendors of what really goes on inside the classroom on a daily basis, with a resultant sale of a product which is completely inept for the task for which it was purchased; and all those specialty systems and software packages, designed "especially for you," which are sloppy, don't run, and should be an embarrassment to their vendors, including the best and most respected names in publishing and education. The most unfair aspect of this matter, I feel, is the attitude of the vendors toward the prospective buyer with respect to the fact that the funds are public money, and may therefore be wasted on any sort of thing that smacks of state-of-the-art teaching technology, but which may in fact be of little value or impossible to maintain over a long period. Most vendors regard teachers as easy marks for a quick sale of equipment or material which may or may not ever contribute to anyone's education. This, then, is our greatest problem: to be intelligent, informed, and enlightened buyers of equipment which will help educate the student and contribute to the unified effort of the school as a whole in the use of microcomputer equipment, with only the students' learning in mind. At this point, I feel it's a pretty tall order.

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. . . but "partial solutions" are becoming available

Editor:

Mr. Colontoni makes a very important point about the difficulty of choosing equipment. There is such a range of microcomputer systems that even the sophisticated purchaser is bewildered. The neophyte (which describes most educators) is completely at the mercy of the vendor's ads and of salespeople.

There are partial solutions in many areas of the US, with individuals and groups developing expertise and providing guidance to educators. These include Dr. Karl Zinn, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor; Dr. Judy Edwards, Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, Portland, Oregon; Bob Albrecht (the Dragon), Dymax, Menlo Park, California; Robert Haven, Project LOCAL, Westwood, Massachusetts; Lud Braun, SUNY at Stony Brook, New York; Dr. Thomas Dwyer, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Dr. David Moursund, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. There are also local microcomputer user groups and school people who are knowledgeable and willing to help.

One of the authors (Braun) has been working with Congressman Thomas Downey of New York on a bill to establish several National Centers for Personal Computers in Education whose charge would be to address the needs identified so well by Mr. Colontoni. This bill (H.R. 7459) has been in the hopper for almost a year and a half and has yet to get on the subcommittee's agenda. Educators obviously need to lobby for the interests of their students!

Unfortunately, bad experiences with new equipment leave scars on the psyches of many educators which heal very slowly if at all. Educators must get good advice, if their students are to benefit from these exciting micros.

In the interim, journals like Creative Computing, Recreational Computing, The Computing Teacher, and THE Journal can help educators. In addition, David Moursund chaired the ACM Elementary and Secondary School Subcommittee, which has published a report with a great deal of information for educators. Information about the cost and availability of this report may be obtained from Dr. David Moursund, Computer Science Department, University of Oregon, Eugene, Or 97401.

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