Coping or Copping Out?

D eciding what computer system to buy is not an easy task. Hardware requires compatible software; software should be compatible with the present curriculum; and the staff who implement the curriculum must skillfully maneuver the software/hardware combination to reach their instructional goals. Therefore, before making a "simple" purchase, a school district must consider curriculum, staff development, and maintenance issues as well as contextual influences such as public expectations and an ever-changing technology.

Nevertheless, a recent national survey of 30 major school districts found that an increasing number of school administrators are delegating these decisions to outsiders who propose "complete" systems. An offer of a coherent package of hardware, software, training, and maintenance is certainly a seductive one. It eliminates the need to choose without sufficient experience, evaluate without accepted standards, and involve an entire school or district in a time-consuming learning process.

But will the convenience of decision making without the discomfort of thought take us where we really want to go? True, in recent years our purpose many times has been to have computers—a visible response to public interest and pressure to join the information society. Now, if for no other reason than the resources invested in them, we must begin to view computers not as an end but as a means. But to what?

The answers to that question can't be purchased in a "complete" system. There is no shortcut to coherent use of technology to support the accomplishment of a school's goals. These institutional purposes are achieved only as a consequence of all the people in an organization becoming more effective in accomplishing their individual purposes. Thus the process of determining how new tools become integrated into present curriculum/instructional roles and relationships must be approached as a problem-solving exercise, a school-by-school exploration of present barriers to teaching and administrative effectiveness. For instance, how can the technology assist directly or indirectly by freeing teacher time? More significantly, how can it permit a school to accomplish purposes considered impractical until now? The lack of access to continuously updated information about students, for example, limits true diagnostic-prescriptive teaching.

Tools empower those who use them. To increase educational effectiveness, users must search for their own "complete" answers. Seemingly complex purchase decisions need not be delegated to outsiders. Much less administrative risk is involved when decisions are the result of a process in which the right people asking the right questions discover their own "complete" answers.

I am not suggesting that "complete" packages are of no value once the right questions have been asked. Especially valuable may be software leases that provide for annual upgrading.

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