

# LEADERSHIP



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## OVERVIEW

### CONTROLLING FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

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I don't recall hearing about computer literacy for several years. You remember computer literacy: the course the conservative Commission on Excellence said every high school student should be required to take. Just six years later, most schools still don't have a lot of computers, but nearly everyone recognizes that it would be foolish to wait until high school for students to find out about them. In fact, we don't have a choice; even very young children (those from favored homes) routinely use a "mouse" and an "enter" key.

I don't know whether I'm computer literate or not. I use my two computers almost every day, but I've never learned programming, and I don't know much about how computers work. I have a general idea, but I really don't need to know the details, any more than I need to know exactly how my car engine or video recorder works.

I am surrounded by devices that I use but do not fully understand. All ASCD staff members have had a class or two on how to use our telephone system, but we continually ask each other how to switch a call to another office or how to bring someone else on the line. Those who have called our offices lately know that we have an automated answering service. A recorded voice leads callers through a maze of "If-you-want-X-touch-2" instructions that delight some people and infuriate others.

I've said I don't need to know exactly how the phone system works, but what should I be expected to know to live compatibly with the tools of our modern world? More to the point, what should today's students be learning to prepare them for life in tomorrow's world?

When educators use the word *technology*, we sometimes equate it with computers, but, although computers are a highly visible and fascinating example, the term is much broader. Technology keeps premature babies and comatose patients alive. Technology brings foods to our tables from all over the world. Technology gives us the capability to destroy the earth's atmosphere and cut down the tropical rain forests. Technology enables us to dump millions of gallons of crude oil on Alaskan beaches.

With atomic technology we can blow up the earth. Technology is like a vengeful god; we are grateful for the comforts it brings but frightened of what it may do to us.

Technology is also a major contributor to other trends, including internationalism and democratization, that are sweeping the globe. We all know about these trends. Asked about the future, any well-informed person can talk about the global economy, the environment, and so on. Meanwhile, schools go on pretty much as they always did. What should we be doing to prepare our students for life in a very different world?

The authors in this issue have ideas about that. Steve Benjamin (p. 8), for example, offers a distillation of what leading futurists expect and advocate. Chris Dede (p. 23) explains how computers will complement and enhance human capabilities, and suggests implications for curriculum. Myriam Met (p. 54), aware of the growing importance of foreign languages in a shrinking world, offers criteria for deciding which languages to teach.

Some authors describe current efforts to align schools with future needs. Executive Director Gordon Cawelti (p. 30) sums up the accomplishments of three ASCD high school consortiums, including the most recent one, a group of 25 schools that met between 1987 and 1989. Anita DeKock and Craig Paul (p. 46) tell how the Muscatine, Iowa, schools have developed an extensive global education program.

Finally, a group of authors discuss *postmodernism*, which Sam Crowell (p. 60) calls "a new way of thinking." William Doll (p. 65), for example, tells how he joined with a 6th grade teacher to learn how to apply "complexity theory" to mathematics problem solving.

Postmodernism may indeed offer us a fresh way of thinking about the future. We do not have to be the helpless victims of the benign but dangerous Frankenstein's monster we have created; we can develop what Harold Shane (p. 4) calls "educated foresight." And as Sam Crowell says, we can accept the challenge "to create a new vision of our role as humans" and "educate students to achieve that potential." □

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