
How Not to Use Computers to Teach Kids

Brian Harvey, *bh@eecs.berkeley.edu*

Computer Science Division University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

In the US, all but the poorest schools have well-equipped computer labs these days. But the emphasis is on multimedia and Web search. In this talk I'll give an example, taken from my experience as a volunteer in an elementary school, in which this emphasis actually hurts learning, leaving kids with false and confusing ideas about the topic (in this case, the US Constitution).

The first problem is that the information found on the Web is drowning in a sea of misleading information not really relevant to the topic; kids would learn better if they found what they need either in a book (or even a Web page) specifically designed to inform kids their age, or were just told by their teacher.

The teacher, meanwhile, is much too busy helping kids figure out which button to click in Photoshop or PowerPoint to pay attention to what the kids are learning about the supposed content of the lesson. The software is much too hard to master, partly because of bad design and partly because it's designed for the complicated needs of graphics professionals rather than for the simple needs of students.

The moral is that just putting computers in a school doesn't guarantee good results. I'll compare good and bad uses of computers and draw lessons from what went wrong in this case.