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CAUGHT IN THE INTERNET

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When educators think a good deal about whether we are teaching the right things in the right way, and we try to imagine how and what we will be required to teach in the future. To tell the truth, some of the discussion we have on topics like these can get pretty dry. So I was more than slightly pleased when recently I found myself smack in the middle of a lively illustration of how our ideas of literacy are likely to change in the near, near future.

Jeanne and I had flown to San Francisco to visit her daughter, Kelly. Before we left I had been reading one of those novels that won't be left behind. It was the kind of book you must keep with you at all times in case you get a few free minutes to read, and it doesn't matter where. (Specifically, this was the fifth in the series of eighteen historical novels by Patrick O'Brian detailing the seafaring careers of two great friends. Jack Aubrey is "famously" at home on the deck of his

square-rigged ship, but all at sea on land, while Stephen Maturin is a brilliant naturalist, physician and spy, but the most hopeless of fools with women.) I had about four hours of uninterrupted reading on the flight out while Jeanne was sleeping, mostly. For the remainder of the visit I read in units measured in minutes. San Francisco and the company were wonderful, but a book is a book, and if you are careful, you can both visit and read without being rude. For example, if everyone else in the group is shopping in a fancy department store, it is legal to sit in one of those idiot chairs that are scattered around (usually outside fitting rooms) and read until everyone is finished looking for stuff to buy. In fact, it is clever to do this in expensive stores since you get to read while at the same time you save money by not purchasing anything for yourself.

So, there I was, mixing pleasure with pleasure when the time-warp hit. Kelly works in the computer world there, writ-

ing news stories for the industry magazine *MacWeek* about developments in the field of computer graphics software. (Don't be concerned if this confuses you. It merely means you are in the best of positions to appreciate the confusion I was about to face.) In short, she knows how computers work. She also saw me sneaking "reads" (a word in my family for the compulsive behavior I've described), and asked about the book. All I did was show her the cover, and before I was able to mark my book with a San Francisco bus transfer slip, Kelly had powered up her snazzy home computer and we were on the internet. Swaths of garish color flashed and competed for our attention. "Use Me!", scream the Yahoo people. "I'll find it faster," begs another internet service. "Search for - Patrick O'Brian," (hit "Enter") and, Paboom!, we're in. Seconds later the screen is filled with information about Patrick O'Brian. Websites focusing on the details of his life and work scrolled on and on. There were pictures of the man and lengthy quotes from a speaking tour he had just made across the United States. Do you want to see a site where a fan (a deeply devoted one, apparently) has drawn detailed maps of numerous naval battles described in O'Brian's novels? Click here and scroll down. Hmmm. Stop there. When I read *The Mauritius Command* I couldn't figure out how Jack Aubrey was able to land troops on the beach with the wind coming from that direction. I had imagined the island upside down in my mind's eye. I started to get the idea. Ask, and it shall be yours. Futtocks are the pieces of timber that are fastened together

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to form the ribs of large ships. A gibbett is an upright post with a projecting arm from which the bodies of criminals are hung after execution. To scrag is to wring someone's neck.

While reading the novels I came across these words and, not wishing to stop to look them up (even if I had been able to find a dictionary of nineteenth century nautical terms), I filled in the best meaning for them I could imagine, and rushed on. I even managed to finish *The Mauritius Command* without a decent understanding of how the direction of the wind and tide made the action possible, not to mention where the bloody islands were in relation to one another. Now I was given the chance to tap into a community of people of indeterminate size who shared with me an affection for (or commercial interest in) Patrick O'Brian's novels.


I was, of course, fascinated. I had used the internet before, but until that moment I had not seen such a compelling illustration of the likely impact of this technology on education in the future. Even if we want to do so, it will be impossible to deny the internet a place in our educational plans. This was clear from the speed, the flash and power of the relatively simple internet search Kelly had done for me. In addition, Kelly assured me that

the technology is in its infancy, and that when the internet finally gets its act together, it will be really fast and efficient. Then serious work, like reliable data and information searches, will be routinely available.

Of course, the internet does have its problems. Think of the internet as the world's biggest library. It contains information from all over the world, any amount of which is almost instantly available upon request. However, this particular library still has no procedure for deciding what will be allowed on its shelves. Anyone can submit work for inclusion, and in the great unrefined democracy of the institution, a single request for information can yield any level of information. There are polished commercial ads for products (toys to torture machines), services (poems written to manuscripts typed and put on computer disks), ideas (novels and data bases) and visuals (pictures and film clips). There are also inarticulate and wacky political and moral diatribes by individuals whose access to the internet is only limited by their knowledge of its mechanics. Actually, democracy might be the wrong word for the net, since no one really runs the thing. Perhaps anarchy would be better.

I am certain the internet will be a part of our educational future, but I am also


certain that the role it will play is still up in the air. I am old enough to remember that in its early days television was predicted to be a great boon to education. It never was, and it still is not. It is a commercial and entertainment tool. If we do not act aggressively to shape this new technology, it will be of even less use in education than television has been.

Access to information is the great dividing line for the social classes in this society, and literacy is its conveyance. If you can't read well, your prospects for earning a good living and for controlling the circumstances of your everyday life (such as knowing how to take care of your money, read contracts you must sign, and make decisions about medical care) are dim. The ability to read, once a gift given only to our more advantaged citizens, is now more widely available through the institution of our (largely) universal system of education. Kelly has been reading since she was three, went to top schools and now is also fluent in the emerging technologies of literacy that will apparently be the repositories of our information tomorrow. She is in a good position. But what will we do to assure that introduction of this new complex and expensive technology will not further limit access to information to a smaller and smaller segment of our society? 

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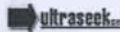
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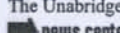
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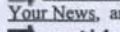


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