

Did Socrates Use a Smart Board?

By: Theodore Christou

There is no promise of progress. We are as susceptible to failure as we are to triumph. We err. Technology is a broker of both genius and folly.

In the early half of the twentieth century, progressive education stood out as the great reform movement that could shake the dust off our educational thought and action. Progressives wanted to pull the public education system, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the modern age. Telephones, automobiles, passenger flights, radio — in our age, the internet, biotechnologies, televisions, and SmartPhones — marked radical, swift, and dramatic technological progress. The rate of technological progress is alarming, alienating us increasingly quickly and consistently from skills and modes of communication with which we have grown accustomed.

The latest computer is faster, and smarter. The latest software is more robust, and dynamic. The latest Smart Board, television set, and sound system are more interactive, clearer, and crisper. If we could wield the latest technologies and implement these in our instruction, classrooms could be part of the progress that technology promises but, perhaps more importantly, demonstrates. Technology is our beacon of light.

Does it follow, we must ask in offering an example, that a classroom with Smart Board technology offers a better learning space? Did Socrates teach with a Smart Board? I do not intend to single out a single culprit here. As a species, we seemed to survive millennia without technologies that we presently find indispensable. It certainly is difficult conducting research, writing, editing, and publishing without computers, internet, and software programs but, at the risk of posing far too many questions here, dare we wonder whether these are necessary in education?

New Brunswick's emphasis on developing 21st Century Skills, abbreviated and branded as 21C, may be profoundly misguided as an aim. Schools do not, I wish to argue, have a responsibility to prepare students for life. Life prepares students for life. Schools must educate, which necessitates a concern for broadening rather than limiting our experiences and understandings. Outside the school, life is increasingly *plugged in, hyperlinked*, and dependent on digital or electronic technologies. This offers all the more reason for schools to emphasize the use of alternative media and means of communication. To prepare students for the 21st century, we must only prepare them to live reflectively, honestly, virtuously, and communally.

To make progress in humanist education, I argue that we must plan *fewer* opportunities for students to learn narrowly technical skills, and *more* opportunities to relate to each other and to the world as human beings; we must dance, sing, draw, play, and prance each day. We needn't scan our fingerprints in order to purchase food from the school cafeteria no matter how efficiently such administrative systems may appear. Efficiency is a value best applied to factories. Unless schools are, in actuality, factories — which may be a matter worthy of debate — we should radically rethink the ways that we fund, administer, and define the aims of school. Technology is a valuable means to an end, but it is no noble end in itself. No correlation between technological and educational progress is necessary.

School reformers will always self-style as progressives. Imagine, if you can, a *regressive* education movement. Technological progress is a marvel; its accelerated rate of change over the past century has left us spinning and struggling at times to recognize the world around us merely to keep up. Education, however, is not an iPod. Version 21.0 of schooling is not necessarily better than version 3.0, or 1.0 for that matter. We, the newest and the most up-to-date, are not the pinnacle of human achievement. The promise of progress is a daunting thought with regards to education, particularly because we have yet to have a sustained public debate about the ends we aspire to achieve. Progress is always towards some end. In which direction should we bravely face? In the absence of some coherent vision of what we think an educated person is, one which frames an ethically defensible vision of schooling, the notion *progress* will remain dubious, at best.

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