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Where are we going as we leave no child behind? La technique and Postman, Papert, and Palmer—Part One

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Where are we going as we leave no child behind? La technique and Postman, Papert, and Palmer—Part One

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Where are we going as we leave no child behind? La technique and Postman, Papert, and Palmer—Part One

Posted on **February 1, 2004** by **Editor**



By **Michael T. Charles** <charlesm@pacificu.edu>

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In short, for the first time in federal education policy, schools, districts and states will be able to use high-quality information for data-driven reforms so that we can improve public education for every child. “The Facts About...State Improvement Lists” US Department of Education website. Retrieved January 10, 2004 at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/state/improvementlists.html>

- [.01 No Child Left Behind—a brief look \(return to index\)](#)

The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), frequently referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2001, is by all accounts a landmark piece of legislation designed to significantly impact K-12 education in the United States. Major provisions in the legislation include annual testing in grades 3-8, adequate yearly progress provisions that can

be used to identify low performing or “failing” schools, more public school choice and supplemental services from outside vendors for students in low performing schools, new teacher quality provisions, and a call for scientifically based research. (Hershman, 2003). As the quote above indicates, at the heart of this legislation is the notion that annual testing will provide “high quality information” which will enable reforms that are “data driven,” i.e. changes will be made in schools to improve student achievement as measured by annual test scores.

This legislation was passed by an overwhelming majority in both houses of Congress. Nevertheless there are many who are critical of NCLB. Recently one of the bills co-sponsors points out that the Bush administration’s has failed thus far to fully fund this initiative (the White House requested \$18 billion dollars in funding but has spent only \$12 billion dollars of that money). [1]

Education organizations have suggested that NCLB is an unfunded federal mandate, since the costs of developing, administering, and analyzing the results of the annual testing program falls wholly on the states. The National Education Association (NEA) is considering taking legal action. [2]

Some school reform advocates, while supporting the stated goals of the legislation to improve low performing schools and close the achievement gap between lower socio-economic status students and students of groups that have been ascribed minority status, see a much darker purpose in the legislation. Since the funding levels do not approach what is needed to achieve the stated goals of the act, and since sanctions are imposed on schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress on their stated goals, they contend that the intended effect of this legislation is to prove that public schools are “failing” in order to enact a *de facto* voucher system. [3]

NCLB is the beginning of the end of the “public school monopoly” [4] according to some advocacy groups; critics describe it as “part of a larger political and ideological effort to privatize social programs, reduce the public sector, and ultimately replace local control of institutions like schools with marketplace reforms that substitute commercial relations between customers for democratic relations between citizens.” [5] For further discussion of the NCLB legislation, see the NCLB resources collected at the end of this article.

What is absent from this increasingly heated discussion is a fundamental critique of the values underlying this legislation. NCLB represents a watershed mark in a century-long movement to think of education as a production task. Standards are established for all students—analagous to a set of product specifications for a production assembly line. Curricula are written for teachers to use to build those products. Standardized exams function as quality control checks of those products on that production line. NCLB mandates that all products from the line be raised to a certain quality standard—i.e. all students must pass the exam. No child should be left behind. It is difficult to argue against this notion of higher quality once one views education as a production task. My suggestion is that this idea is fundamentally wrong, and that education is instead a

profoundly human endeavor. To understand this distinction, we must begin by better describing the technical thinking that is the basis for NCLB.

This kind of technical thinking applied to more human fields such as education is not new, and did not originate with the current administration or this apparently bipartisan approach to improving education in the United States. One of the earliest and most eloquent critic of this technical kind of thinking is the French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul. He first analyzed this phenomenon not during the most recent presidential election cycle, but just following World War II. Furthermore the phenomenon he analyzed was apparent not just in the early 21st century, but one hundred years earlier.

.02 **la technique—the monopoly of technical thinking** ([return to index](#))

The phenomenon that lies behind the NCLB legislation was described by Jacques Ellul as *la technique* in his book of the same name in (1954), translated into English as *The Technological Society* in part because of the recommendation of Aldous Huxley, the author of *A Brave New World* in 1932. Ellul (1964) defines *la technique* as the “totality of means, rationally arrived at and having (for any given stage of development) absolute efficiency.” (xxv). He argues that the effect of this phenomenon is the consumption of all human ends by increasingly technological means. [6]

Ellul's writing can be a challenging read, and many of his examples are from postwar France and world events which many of us today may not find so compelling. The contemporary American writer Neil Postman revisits much of Ellul's argument in his book *Technopoly—the monopoly of technical thinking*. In this book he describes the surrender of culture to technology. His premise is that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity. [7] In the field of education I would restate his argument to say that the fundamentally human character of education is being increasingly invaded by the same technological thinking that dominates in our culture. NCLB is an embodiment of that invasion.

Both Postman and Ellul share a conviction that technology is not neutral, a tool to be used to either good or bad ends depending on human choice. This position has been described by others as technological or media determinism. The notion is that the uses of technology are predetermined by the nature of the technology itself. In our world, increasingly all pressing problems are conceived of as technical problems to be solved by improved technical means.

Thus this technical way of thinking argues that if we are to improve public education through NCLB, we must first produce high quality information so we can make the necessary changes to help all students learn more. The end goal is to help all students learn. But how will we know they are learning? According to this logic, we will know they are learning by simply developing Standards and an objective and reliable way to measure student accomplishment in relation to those Standards. In the case of NCLB the measurement tool is an annual test to be designed and given by the different states. These technical means will tell us if our students are learning. In

fact, we believe, that this is the only legitimate way to know of that our students are learning.

Postman points out that notions of the “scientific management” of the education workplace are not new ones. Frederick Taylor first wrote about making a science of the industrial workplace in his book *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911. His stated goal was to secure higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions for industrial workers. He conducted “time and motion studies” to help workers learn to do their job more efficiently. For Postman, Taylor’s work was the first clear statement of the value that underlies NCLB—that society is best served when human beings are placed at the disposal of techniques and technology.

According to Postman, technopoly is the functioning ideology of our time. An ideology is “A set of assumptions of which we are barely conscious but which nonetheless directs our efforts to give shape and coherence to the world.” (123). Ideologies function in an invisible way. Both Ellul and Postman think that making the current ideology of our day visible so that it can be examined and critiqued is of vital importance.

For Postman there is no better place to go to see the way that our human ends are increasingly consumed by ever-improving technical means than a technology conference, something that I attend regularly as part of my work in educational technology. He states:

Attend any conference on telecommunications or computer technology, and you will be attending a celebration of innovative machinery that generates, stores, and distributes more information, more conveniently, at greater speeds than ever before. To the question “What problem does the information solve?” the answer is usually “How to generate, store, and distribute more information, more conveniently, at greater speeds than before.” This is the elevation of information to metaphysical status: information both as the means and the end of human creativity. (Postman, p. 61)

I suggest that this same mindset is at the heart of NCLB, one that elevates better quality information as both the means and the end of educational improvement. As the quote at the beginning of this article proclaims, the reason that NCLB is such a significant step forward in federal education policy is that it will allow us to improve public education for every child (the stated end goal of the policy) by producing higher quality information (the desired means to accomplish the policy). Without the better information provided by the annual testing scheme, we cannot improve public education. To the technical mindset, there is no other choice. The first problem facing us in public education, for the proponents of NCLB, is securing higher quality information.

Postman views this solution as nonsense. He states:

The computer argues, to put it baldly, that the most serious problems confronting us at both personal and professional levels require technical solutions through fast access to information otherwise unavailable. I would argue that this is, on the face of it, nonsense. Our most serious

problems are not technical, nor do they arise from inadequate information. If a nuclear catastrophe occurs, it shall not be because of inadequate information. Where people are dying of starvation, it does not occur because of inadequate information. If families break up, children are mistreated, crime terrorizes a city, education is impotent, it does not happen because of inadequate information. Mathematical equations, instantaneous communication, and vast quantities of information have nothing whatever to do with any of these problems. And the computer is useless in addressing them. (Postman, p. 119)

Thus according to Postman's critique, the production of higher quality information about student learning is not at all the first step in improving education. It is instead a critical step in reducing education to a production task, one that can be improved through ever better technical means.

.03 **Postman's error—confusing the artifact with the phenomenon** ([return to index](#))

In my opinion Postman updates Ellul's arguments for an American audience in a particularly effective way, but there is a serious error in his thinking. Postman confuses the technological phenomenon with the technological artifact. As Postman's second quote above indicates, he equates the computer (the technological artifact) with *la technique* (the technological phenomenon). Stated differently, he equates visible and invisible technologies. But Ellul is quite clear that while technological machines such as the computer are the embodiment of technical thinking, technical thinking comes first and, more importantly, invades every sphere of human activity long before the machines do so.

Thus Postman is particularly critical of computers being used in K-12 education, as he believes that they will eventually take the place of teachers. This "human replaced by machines" argument (think of HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* [Clark, 1968]) or "machines taking over the world (think of Orson Welles in *The War of the Worlds* [Welles, 1938]) is not at the heart of the problem. In fact it can be a serious distracter. The problem facing us is the invasion of increasing technical thinking (or invisible technologies) into non-technical human endeavors.

I would suggest instead that NCLB represents the real invasion of technical thinking into K-12 education much more so than something like increasing use of the Internet by technologically savvy K-12 students and educators. To better understand this argument and possible responses, our attention turns to a different contemporary figure that I believe understood the heart of Ellul's argument about *la technique* yet embraced the use of computers in schools—Professor Seymour Papert of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab. That will be the subject of the next article in this series.

.04 **Notes** ([return to index](#))

[1] "The goal of the historic No Child Left Behind Act was to ensure that all students, not just some students but all students, improve their learning at school. In particular, the goal was to eliminate this achievement gap between different groups of students. We cannot lose sight of this

fundamental goal of the law. But the goal of this law is being undermined by the failure of the Administration to properly implement or fund the law as written by Congress.” Comments by Representative George Miller (D-CA). Retrieved January 10, 2004 from <http://edworkforce.house.gov/democrats/releases/rel111303c.html>.

[2] “Last month, the NEA announced plans to sue the federal government over NCLB, and bills have been introduced to stop the law’s sanctions.”

Retrieved January 10, 2004 from

http://www.onlinejournal.com/Special_Reports/080203Rose/080203rose.html

[3] “As the consequences of NCLB emerge, it is time to talk about the real issues: what schools are being held accountable for, and what the unfunded mandates actually require. The law deals in such obscure jargon that the truth can be difficult ferret out. The more one learns, however, the more one understands why National Education Association President Reg Weaver calls Bush’s education policy a “Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde” that will “pave the way for vouchers and privatization.” Retrieved January 10, 2004 from

http://www.onlinejournal.com/Special_Reports/080203Rose/080203rose.html.

[4] “In 1989, Harvard professor Paul E. Peterson took a brief break from his research on welfare reform and federalism to write a paper on the history of monopoly and competition in public schools. Its conclusion was not exactly novel. Public schools, Peterson found, had largely succeeded during the last century in establishing a quasi-monopoly in education, quashing competitive threats from private and parochial schools.” From Paul Peterson’s article “The Voice of School Choice,” retrieved January 10, 2004 from

<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/global/page.cfm?id=31>

[5] “Unfortunately, the new federal education law, which is currently wreaking havoc in schools from Portland to Paterson, is not a laughing matter. This 1100-page bill was passed a few months after 9/11 when few people were paying close attention in Congress or elsewhere. It may well be the worst education bill ever passed by the federal government. There are so many things wrong with this law, so many things that are educationally inappropriate and hostile to the welfare of public education that we can only talk about some of them today.” Retrieved January 10, 2004 from

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bushplan/hoax.shtml.

[6] To explore Ellul’s thinking in greater depth, see

<http://www.ellul.org/index.htm>.

[7] To explore several reviews of Postman’s work, see the following:

- “What Neil Postman has to say”

http://www.ibiblio.org/cmc/mag/1995/mar/hyper/npcontexts_119.html

- A critical review:
<http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/~elmurphy/emurphy/technop.html>
- A more positive review from a Canadian perspective.
http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue_06.25.92/arts/bo0625b.htm

.05 **NCLB Resources** ([return to index](#))

- <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb>
The United States Department of Education website. “Signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, the No Child Left Behind act gives our schools and our country groundbreaking educational reform, based on the following ideals:
 - Stronger Accountability for Results
 - More Freedom for States and Communities
 - Encouraging Proven Education Methods
 - More Choices for Parents
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/>
The Public Broadcasting System’s (PBS) program Frontline analysis and collection of resources re NCLB
- Further readings that are generally in support of NCLB
 - <http://republicans.edlabor.house.gov/archive/press/press107/bushradioaddress10403.htm>
“House Committee on Education and the Workforce Chair John Boehner (R-OH) praises President Bush for education budget announcement, challenges education reform opponents to use funds to get results” – January 4, 2003
 - http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/topic/topic.cfm?topic_id=5
“In January 2002, President Bush signed into law a sweeping bipartisan federal education reform bill, dubbed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The law is a well-intentioned attempt to raise the quality of education for all children throughout the country by raising standards, holding schools, districts and teachers accountable for what they do, and providing some options to students trapped in persistently failing schools. Of course, as with any major federal initiative, NCLB is not without kinks. This section of the website contains information for those seeking to better understand the provisions of this landmark law and its implications for students, teachers and administrators and schools throughout the country.”
- Further readings that are generally critical of NCLB
 - http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bushplan/index.shtml
“He claims to want “no child left behind.” But President Bush is touting a school “reform” plan that would leave more children than ever in schools that don’t provide the high-quality education that all children deserve.”

- <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0305mat.htm>

“The promise of providing all children with a high-quality education is a noble one. But after looking at the projected costs for 10 states to fulfill the requirements of NCLB, Mr. Mathis fears that the federal government is asking too much and giving too little.”
From the Phi Delta Kappan article by William J. Mathis.

.06 **References** ([return to index](#))

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21 THOUGHTS ON “WHERE ARE WE GOING AS WE LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND? LA TECHNIQUE AND POSTMAN, PAPERT, AND PALMER—PART ONE”

law resume

on **January 30, 2014 at 12:34 AM** said:

bookmarked!!, I love your website!

Carri

on **January 30, 2014 at 2:52 AM** said:

Woah! I'm really digging the template/theme of this blog.

It's simple, yet effective. A lot of times it's tough to get that "perfect balance" between user friendliness and visual appearance. I must say you have done a awesome job with this. Also, the blog loads super fast for me on Chrome. Exceptional Blog!

website software os x

on **January 30, 2014 at 5:34 AM** said:

Hey there! Do you know if they make any plugins to help with Search Engine Optimization?

I'm trying to get my blog to rank for some targeted keywords but I'm not seeing very good gains. If you know of any please share. Cheers!

mortgage cost on 250 000

on **January 30, 2014 at 6:44 AM** said:

You've made some really good points there. I checked on the internet for additional information about the issue and found most people will go along with your views on this site.

Troy

on **January 30, 2014 at 10:14 AM** said:

A fascinating discussion is worth comment. I do think that you ought to publish more about this issue, it may not be a taboo matter but generally people don't talk about such subjects. To the next! Many thanks!!

rescue dog training

on **January 30, 2014 at 10:59 AM** said:

Hmm it looks like your blog ate my first comment (it was extremely long) so I guess I'll just sum it up what I had written and say, I'm thoroughly enjoying your blog. I as well am an aspiring blog blogger but I'm still new to everything. Do you have any tips and hints for rookie blog writers? I'd certainly appreciate it.

mortgage guaranty insurance corporation

on **January 30, 2014 at 11:55 AM** said:

If you are going for best contents like me, simply pay a quick visit this website all the time for the reason that it provides feature contents, thanks

Andrea

on **January 30, 2014 at 3:44 PM** said:

What's up everybody, here every person is sharing these kinds of knowledge, thus it's fastidious to read this blog, and I used to go to see this web site daily.

car price table

on **January 30, 2014 at 4:09 PM** said:

excellent issues altogether, you simply won a emblem new reader. What would you recommend in regards to your post that you just made a few days in the past? Any positive?

losing weight

on **January 30, 2014 at 4:15 PM** said:

After I originally left a comment I seem to have clicked the -Notify me when new comments are added- checkbox and now each time a comment is added I receive four emails with the exact same comment.

There has to be a way you are able to remove me from that service?
Cheers!

mortgage tips vancouver

on **January 30, 2014 at 9:02 PM** said:

Hey I know this is off topic but I was wondering if you knew of any widgets I could add to my blog that automatically tweet my newest twitter updates.

I've been looking for a plug-in like this for quite some time and was hoping maybe you would have some experience with something like this.

Please let me know if you run into anything. I truly enjoy reading your blog and I look forward to your new updates.

kettlebell training brisbane

on **January 31, 2014 at 2:54 AM** said:

Oh my goodness! Amazing article dude! Thank you so much, However I am going through problems with your RSS. I don't know why I can't join it. Is there anybody else having similar RSS problems? Anybody who knows the answer will you kindly respond?

Thanks!!

treatment for hemorrhoids

on **January 31, 2014 at 5:30 PM** said:

If you want to grow your familiarity simply keep visiting this site and be updated with the hottest news update posted here.

law merit badge worksheet

on **February 1, 2014 at 4:20 AM** said:

I relish, result in I discovered exactly what I used to be having a look for. You have ended my four day lengthy hunt! God Bless you man. Have a great day. Bye

website updating tips

on **February 1, 2014 at 6:25 AM** said:

Remarkable! Its genuinely amazing paragraph, I have got much clear idea concerning from this piece of writing.

mortgage advice scotland

on **February 1, 2014 at 12:17 PM** said:

Exceptional post but I was wanting to know if you could write a little more on this topic? I'd be very thankful if you could elaborate a little bit more. Cheers!

photo tips manual mode

on **February 1, 2014 at 4:08 PM** said:

Do you mind if I quote a few of your articles as long as I provide credit and sources back to your site? My blog is in the very same area of interest as yours and my users would really benefit from some of the information you present here. Please let

me know if this okay with you. Appreciate it!

tax on lottery winnings

on **February 2, 2014 at 8:26 AM** said:

Wonderful goods from you, man. I've keep in mind your stuff prior to and you're simply too wonderful. I really like what you've got right here, really like what you are saying and the way by which you assert it. You are making it entertaining and you still care for to keep it wise. I can not wait to learn much more from you. This is actually a great website.

Zero Friction Fat Loss Scam

on **February 2, 2014 at 10:11 PM** said:

Just desire to say your article is as surprising. The clearness to your publish is simply spectacular and i can assume you are an expert in this subject.

Fine with your permission let me to snatch your RSS feed to stay up to date with approaching post. Thank you 1,000,000 and please continue the rewarding work.

Georgia

on **February 5, 2014 at 7:28 PM** said:

It's really a nice and helpful piece of information. I'm happy that you shared this helpful info with us. Please keep us informed like this. Thank you for sharing.

Carmen

on **February 6, 2014 at 3:24 AM** said:

When I originally left a comment I seem to have clicked the -Notify me when new comments are added- checkbox and from now on whenever a comment is added I receive 4 emails with the same comment. Perhaps there is a means you are able to remove me from that service? Thanks!