Letter to the Editor

Opinion, Data, and Research

Sir,

A comment in the last *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, Editorial, Volume 5, Number 2, prompts me to add similar thoughts on the second report referred to. The comment in the Editorial, on a report from the Policy Studies Institute, was, 'It is unfortunate that there is only passing reference to the sources or methods of data gathering, with only a list of organizations referred to as 'discussants.' Also, there is no indication of which recommendations are based on data and which are based on the interpretations of the researchers.'

I had a similar reaction in reading 'Power On', from the US Congress Office of Technology Assessment. Although it includes multitudinous tables and graphs and 'boxed' descriptions of individual cases, I found myself immediately reacting with discomfort and sometimes disagreement with some of the apparent conclusions printed in bulleted or bold-faced type throughout the text. Some of these are probably unoffensive truisms ('The technology makes possible the testing and trying of new ideas') and some probably could be supported by a concensus of research experience. ('The teacher is central to full development of technology use in education'). However, others are stated as simplifications which may be unwarranted ('Most teachers want to use technology', 'Teachers can function as facilitators of student learning, rather than in their traditional roles as presenters of ready-made information.').

What worries me is the unclear research base for many of these generalizations. Some indications are given, but often in the form of one or two anecdotes or references to a few selected studies. Those familiar with research in this area know that many difficulties exist in the process of assimilating trends in research; the way statements and conclusions are presented throughout the 'Power On' report may not convey this to the reader.

I checked the indices of the report for a better appreciation of its research base and found that much of its substance is taken from 11 contracted studies. The studies are cited and I have sent away for them, (I have not received them nearly three months later) but a better scholarship would have been to include at least the designs of those studies and their data sources. Also, many individuals are listed as contributors; however, the list is dominated by heavily involved US leaders in the area of computers in education. I am not sure to what extent the report reflects the opinions of individuals not committed to computers in education. Without knowing if the respondent base adequately reflects their opinions I am further uncomfortable with the definitiveness of the statements throughout the report.

I expect the 'Power On' report is going to be heavily cited for years to come and the possibility is strong that its bold-faced or bulleted statements will come to be interpreted as clearly established, well-founded conclusions as they get repeated in journals and newspaper articles. Perhaps the scientific basis of the report is better than it seems, but it is not possible for me to feel confident about this, given the apparent lack of reference to so much of the existing research in its text.

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