

Jane M. Healy, Ph.D.

*Failure to Connect*  
*How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds--and What*  
*We Can Do About It*

by  
Marilynn Hawkins

Jane Healy has worn many hats in her lifetime. She has been in the educational field for more than thirty-five. She has been a classroom teacher, a college professor, a reading and learning specialist, and an elementary school administrator. She is a writer that teachers can really relate to. She is also, a mother and wife and presently lives with her husband in Colorado.

Healy's book was a great representation of beliefs and facts about how technology affects children's minds as they learn. She made one comment early-on about children, teens and adults needing specific well-defined projects to actually make technology construction for them. I see this in my classroom everyday with teenagers. They like using computers and especially using the Internet. But, if left alone, they play games or music or movies that entertain them. They completely miss the fact that the computer can be used to create projects that they can use in other classes. They can use that music and videos that they like in PowerPoint presentations and WebPages that they create.

Healy discusses in her book how teachers and students work together to learn jobs with the computer. In running a lab of 30 computers as I do each day I depend on my students to show me different ways of doing a job. I can assign a certain job like a table that presents data and have several students wanting to set it up a different way. I've learned like Healy has that to be a teacher of computers and software that one has to be flexible. She said that this example could possibly be the perfect lesson, where teacher

and students work together in creating a job from a computer. However, she did say that we have to be careful and ask what is the child actually learning? She commented, "Experience suggests we should temper our enchantment with a critical look at whether anything educational is really being accomplished?"

Healy went even farther to say that the young brains of children who are using computers may be altering their brains. She said that their brains undergo periods of development when their brains are exposed to special kinds of effects and activities that will alter their thinking power. Even the news on television this week reported this very thing--that very young children probably should not watch very much television because it could cause them to become attention deficit disorder. Healy stated that the uncontrolled use of technology could destroy parts of our humanity and could even create a culture that is void of moral foundations.

Healy also points out that most computer and software developers did not grow up with computers. She points out, however, that they all have a high level of imagination. Ideas: that what the business of computers and software is based on. She reminded us that many of these divergent thinkers were not successful in the classroom. Even Bill Gates, creator of Microsoft, was a college dropout.

Many technology and computer users cry that it's only a tool. Healy believes that it is not just a tool. She stated that the use of the computer keeps us from doing the same work by hand. She felt that this could alter our human creativity. I've discussed this fact with the teachers at my school who also gave the GEE 21 to 10th graders. We agreed that the writing part of that test that is required of 10th graders could better be done on a computer. They are give a question to write about and then are instructed to compose a

rough draft copy and then a final copy. They are given one and a half hours to complete this assignment and everything has to be done by hand. Because we are teachers of wordprocessing, we see the many benefits in our classrooms each day when students are allowed to compose on the computer. They use spell check, grammar check, and the thesaurus in their writings. I believe that my students could write better if they could take the GEE 21 test on the computer. Does the computer, then, make students smarter?

Healy discusses the uses of computer software by students, also. She discusses a scenario where a teacher lets several students use a computer to do some creative writing. She calls this process of learning by these students as "Edutainment." Of course, one can see that this is a spin on the words "Education" and "Entertainment." Healy states that most students will choose the entertaining visual task over the more taxing linguistic one. She made four statements that made this point: (1) "Just because children like something does not mean it is good for them or educational." (2) "Learning is, indeed, fun, but it is hard work." (3) "True learning, requires making meaningful connections between facts and ideas." (4) "Some of the *habits of mind* fostered by this software are dangerous." Then, Healy gives some guidelines for using software. Simply stated, she proposes that children need guidance while using software to make it a true learning experience.

Healy asks the question, "How good is software as a teacher?" I ask this question in my own Keyboarding classes. Last year we had textbook adoption and the new Keyboarding textbook chosen came with student software called Microtype. I've been asking myself the question all year: Does this software teach my students better than I did how to type? It is fun, yes, because after each lesson there is a typing game. However, I feel this typing game causes my students to type the wrong way. I have

always focused on certain techniques used at the keyboard and I see my students reverting back to their old way of typing instead of using the techniques that are taught. They do this in order to win the game. So, I have said, about this software, that we sold ourselves to the devil for software.

Healy approaches the idea of gender differences in computer use. She discusses the findings that the male brain is physically different from the female brain. She says that females are better at the fine-motor sequential movements and males are better at visual-spatial skills. She said that boys are able to visualize the ability to rotate a three-dimensional object in their minds and make fewer errors in the mental rotation of objects on the screen. The field of computer science seems to be filled mostly with males. Girls are encouraged to enter this field because of this reason. They can contribute much to this work that their male counterparts can't. Healy has a list of things that girls should do to develop their abilities.

Healy wraps up her book by mentioning that technology uses are all about making choices. Sadly, in many cases, we won't know if we are making the right choices for our students. She said that technology can assist the human brain in compensating for weaknesses. (166) Yet the relationship that people have with their computers is still an uncertain one. Healy said that literacy skills if lost to a generation of computer users may not be regained. It is very true, her belief that the use of computers to enhance our abilities is a good thing, however, we cannot allow computers to replace our intellectual value systems. She believes that the best way we can equip our children is to help them become as human as possible. (200) Computers need to remain a tool and not replace the ability to function in the classroom as some of our cyber children have become today.

Our children must develop the ability to learn and think and not leave this up to the computer that doesn't have the ability to connect personally, socially, and emotionally with humans.

To sum this wonderful book up in just a few words, are we going to let computers control our society and our futures? Or will we remain in control of the learning process and keep the computer as a tool. Are humans going to rise above and control the computer? Or is our society going to reflect the society that was destroyed by the civil war in America--master and slave?