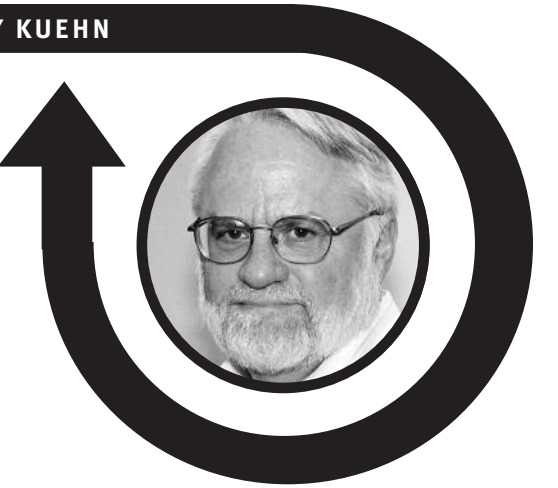
LARRY KUEHN



Technology & Education Roundup

That failed test is for life

Students aged 14 to 19, attending schools in the UK, are going to have their school records permanently placed on a database that prospective employers can check out. The record will include personal details and exam results and will stay with the student for life, according to Reuters news service.

The system is based on a "Unique Learner Number" that will stay with the student and allow data to be brought together from a variety of sources. The program is called "Managing Information Across Partners."

The database will not just be for school information, but also to bring together details "scattered across many databases." The value of the database is being sold on the project web site as saving "a lot of effort for the learner in having to present this information to a prospective employer or college." The president of the National Union of Students wasn't buying it. She asked "Should every slap on the wrist at school count against you forever?"

Another database, ContactPoint, will list all 11 million children in England, including names, addresses, schools, doctor and whether they are receiving help from social services. It could also include whether they have accessed sexual or mental health services.

Vulnerable children who were surveyed about the database expressed worry about the information falling into the wrong hands. They were reassured — it

will only be available to 333,000 users, including school heads, doctors and social and youth workers.

For more information on the surveillance of school children in the U.K. see "Coming for the Kids: Big Brother and the Pied Pipers of Surveillance" by U.K. privacy advocates Ben Hayes & Max Rowlands later in this issue.

Check on the kid's DNA for crime

A Scotland Yard cop contends that primary school children should have their DNA put in a database "if they exhibit behavior indicating they may become criminals in later life," according to an article in the *Observer*. He contended that there would be long-term benefits of targeting people before they offend. A teacher union officer said it was going too far to label students at an early age.

Already the DNA of nearly 1.5 million young people between the ages of 10 and 18 are in a British database. Police have the power to collect DNA from anyone arrested who is over the age of 10, regardless of whether they are later charged, convicted, or found to be innocent.

Facebook to catch the criminals

A Toronto cop has another approach to crime and kids — network with them on Facebook. Scott Mills says "I could prevent violence more from my desk than I could driving around to schools. Just by being out there, engaging with kids online you build relationships."

When a teenaged girl died from a knife stab last January, Toronto police used messages left on a Facebook tribute page to let students know how to provide anonymous tips. They reported that the phone lines lit up.

The Ontario police college is planning to offer a course on how to use social networking sites as a tool to prevent violence.

Kids to help the Mounties get their man

The RCMP is sending 20 teenage Canadian students to an international conference on how to make the Internet safer for young people. The meeting is being hosted by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. These folks run a "virtual police station" where kids can report crimes and then be put in touch with a non-virtual police officer.

The Mounties say they need help from people who are immersed in the new spaces where crimes are being committed. Posting a three-minute video was a means students could use in applying to be a part of the project.

Kids protected online?

The U.S. has legislation that regulates Internet marketing to children under 13 — *The Children's*

Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998. The law has penalties and the social networking site Imbee.com was fined $130,000 for collecting data about its users without parental consent.

Just showing the name and email address of someone under 13 online can be a violation of the Act, enforced by the Federal Trade Commission. The Commission has advised web site operators that they must have parental consent if anyone under 13 is going to send an e-card to a friend and it has their name and email address.

While the FTC is worrying about kids email addresses being shared, companies are developing social networking for pre-schoolers. One set of software is called "JumpStart Advanced Preschool World" that lets kiddies "share artwork with peers, personalize their environments, and play new games," according to a tech news agency. Just to make sure they have "advanced preschoolers," parents can check their toddler's progress on educational games for a subscription costing between $8 and $12 a month.

Kids not protected from sonic intrusion

While a student's email address may be protected, not so their ears. BusRadio is a company that provides radio on school buses and pays a fee to the school district. The company acknowledges in promoting the service to advertisers that it has a "captive audience."

Because it isn't a public broadcast, the company can feature music that an advertiser pays them to play. The ads are targeted as well. An ad for a web company tells students to use the Internet for homework and has a student mocking another for carrying books. Another ad for Cingular cellphone company mocks parental concerns about the cost of cellphone use.

When they say *protection*, they mean protection

The US Department of Homeland Security is going to class. It is sending staff into Washington, D.C. schools to get the kids to nag their parents to prepare emergency kits and plan for disasters. Shades of the 1950s exercise of getting under desks for when the Soviet bombs would start falling.

Homeland Security sent its Ready Kids program to 400,000 teachers around the US and handed out colouring sheets at Disney shows at 42 shopping malls. A New York emergency-preparedness guide offers emergency preparedness advice through nursery rhymes on evacuation. Alabama students were offered a sleepover Be Ready Camp where students learned "terrorism awareness," after which one student said "Taking the patients to triage was fun."

Amazingly, a homeland security specialist at the very right-wing Heritage Foundation called

the programs "stupid." He told the *Washington Post* that "Mathematically, the odds of any child being killed by a terrorist in the United States are infinitesimally small. You might as well give them classes on how to avoid being hit by asteroids."

Take those phones away from Irish kids

Text messages are threatening the quality of writing of kids in Ireland, according to the State Examination Commission. They were appalled at the errors in grammar and punctuation and blamed text messaging.

The student response was Gr8!

Give cellphones to those New York kids

According to the *New York Times*, the New York City Department of education "is considering a proposal to give all students free cellphones, which would use text messages — produced by an advertising agency, Droga 5 — to promote achievement. The plan includes sponsorship opportunities for cellphone makers, service providers and other marketers."

This is a student-motivation proposal by a Harvard economist, Roland Fryer, who is working as a consultant to the city schools. Besides getting the phone, students would earn extra free minutes if they do well in school. Students would be unable to make calls during school hours.

No parent complaints about free cellphones were reported.

Japanese kids all already have cellphones

96 percent of Japanese high school students have a cellphone, according to a government survey. No digital divide there — just a gender one. Girls spend an average of 124 minutes a day on their phone, boys only 92 minutes.

Only a third of elementary school students have their own cellphone. The mobile phone companies are trying to fix that. A new line of phones for small children includes software with picture books and school schedule pads — to help them learn, of course.

Block those cellphones

A fairly simple technology can be used to jam cellphones and they are sold online — from outside North America. They block by sending out a radio signal strong enough to overwhelm the communication between the phone and the cell towers that link the phone to the network.

People who had admitted using the blockers include restaurants, therapists who don't want their sessions interrupted and possibly some teachers. One jammer wrote on a web review that "Just watching those dumb teens at the mall get their calls dropped is worth it."

The blockers are illegal. The cell companies pay big bucks for

the right to own access to the frequencies their system uses and they expect that government will ensure that the frequencies are only available to the corporations.

Smash those cellphones

A college teacher in Roanoke, Virginia, used guerilla theatre to underline his no cellphone rule in class. After announcing a no tolerance policy, he spotted a student trying to turn off his phone. He asked the student for the phone, then pulled a hammer out of his briefcase and smashed the phone. The student asked how he was going to call his mother now. The teacher responded, "Dude, you can sue me." It turns out the student was in on the demonstration. He had brought a long outdated phone with an expired service contract.

Some professors are banning laptops from class, saying that the multi-tasking being performed is distracting, not just to the student with the laptop, but also to those around them. The ban was adopted by business professor Jean Boivin of Montreal when he read in a newspaper that one of his students has lost thousands of dollars day-trading during his class.

Student no-exit option

Smart Technologies is best known for its Smart interactive whiteboard that has pleased many of the teachers who have used it in their classrooms. The company also produces software called SynchronEyes that monitors the activity of every student with a computer on the classroom network.

The company promotes it as allowing the teacher to freeze the computer of an individual student at a click, presumable to keep them from distractions on the web. The teacher can block individual web sites, such as Facebook. A new feature, the "Student no-exit option," lets the teacher make sure that the student can't get away from the lesson.

Korean students rescued from addiction

Korea is the country that is the most heavily connected to the Internet, with nearly everyone having broadband connections. A social networking site called Cyworld includes 85% of Korean Internet users. A consequence of ubiquity, a child psychiatrist in Seoul claims, is that up to 30 percent of South Koreans under the age of 18 (mostly males) are at risk of Internet addiction.

The government has created 140 Internet-addiction counselling centres and 100 hospitals have set up treatment centres, according to the *New York Times*. Researchers have created a checklist that helps diagnose the severity of addition.

An "Internet Rescue Camp" has been created for some of the most severely affected. Participants are

denied all access to computers and limited to one hour on their cellphone, to keep them from playing online games. Campers have to be kept under surveillance at all times, even when they are supposed to be asleep to keep them from trying to satisfy their craving. The key philosophy of the camp is to provide an experience of a life-style without the Internet, something unknown to Korean children.

One of the students at a camp said it was working for him — "From now on, maybe I'll just spend five hours a day online."

Are German teachers sexy?

That is one of things that a German teacher can find out by logging on the German equivalent to ratemyteacher at www.spickmich.de .

One woman teacher went to court to shut it down and won the case based on invasion of privacy. However, the company and some students appealed, overturning the original judgment. The courts said "A degree of criticism must be allowed in any profession."

A German elementary teachers union says online harassment is common and a number of websites use photo-montages of teachers in sexual poses, in executions and as victims in violent computer games.

Africa is into elearning

An annual conference called eLearning Africa has grown to more than 1400 participants who come together annually to share work being carried on throughout the continent.

One group is working on applying speech recognition technology to African tone languages such as Yoruba. Another is using eLearning as an intervention tool against HIV and AIDS by improving the teaching of clinical skills and better preparing students for their first patient encounter.

Not surprisingly, major sponsors of the conference are IT companies like Microsoft, Cisco and Intel, all of which see Africa as the globe's largest relatively untapped market. Canada is a sponsor as well, through the International Development Research Centre, an agency funded by the federal government.

Get those computers off their backs

The Central Okanagan school district in B.C. adopted a computer for every student policy for middle school students. The idea was to be the school of the future. However, it hasn't worked out that way.

Students at one of the schools started an anti-laptop petition in the fall of 2007. One of their complaints was that the computers were hurting their backs. One student said that her backpack weighs about 16 pounds, with about 5 pounds being the computer. Another said her backpack was 35 pounds and caused her back-

aches and a dislocated shoulder. Students said that they didn't really use them in class that much because the teachers were having trouble adapting to them. School administrators, on the other hand, defended the program and said that great work was being done, including student Powerpoint presentations. They particularly felt that boys were being helped in developing their writing skills. They also said the computers were well cared for.

The plan had been to hand out about 10,000 laptops. However, as of the end of the 2007-08 school year, the plan was killed. A budget shortfall was a major factor, but wear and tear on the machines also played a role. Moyra Baxter, chair of the Board of Education said "We did have a lot of damage [to the computers] — I was quite surprised by the amount of damage that had occurred."

The superintendent claimed "93% of students in Central Okanagan have access to computers at home, so the need to take the laptop home has changed substantially over the last two or three years."

Substitute teacher may get 40-year sentence for computer porn

A woman subbing in a Norwich, Connecticut school was convicted of exposing students to pornographic images that were on the browser of her computer, according to an alternet.com report. Students were brought into court to testify that they had seen pornographic ads on the computer from their seats or when they went up to the teacher's desk.

Forty year-old Julie Amato was found guilty by a jury of four counts of "injury or risk or injury to, or impairing the morals of children." Each of the counts carries a maximum sentence of 10 years.

Her defense attorney tried to present evidence that the computer was infected with malware which caused the images to appear, not an action by the teacher. Expert evidence that the computer was infected with several programs that had taken over the computer was excluded by the court because the defense attorney had not notified the prosecution that they intended to raise the issue of malware.

The computer had been in an unlocked classroom, connected to a school network that had no protection against invasive software because the firewall license had expired. A defense expert checked the sites that had been surfed before class started and said he thought it was probably a student who had been surfing. At 8:15 (the class started at 9) someone had accessed www.hair-styles.org, which he thought was probably the source of the malware that initiated the porn download, and then Crayola's home page.

After a successful appeal, Amato faces a new trial.

Neopets as a business model

Virtual pets may be easier to clean up after, but they have also brought opportunities for commercializing childhood. The online role-playing game Neopets.com has bright, splashy cartoon characters inviting children in to play — all for free. So what is the catch?

Neopets uses what it calls "immersive advertising." The commercials are not an interlude between elements of the game, they are inside the game. While kids are playing, they are exposed to product placements of drinks, toys, movies and the like.

Research into how kids see the site found that they thought someone had created it because they wanted to share the fun of online games, according to Ellen Seiter in *The Internet Playground: Children's access, entertainment and mis-education*. She says that children had trouble identifying the advertising aspects of the site.

Nickelodeon, owners of Neopets, are spending $100 million to develop a further "string of worlds."

Students claim copyright — and demand more than $200,000 for each essay

In the struggle against plagiarism, more than 7,000 educational institutions use the services of turnitin.com. The company that runs it says they get more than 100,000 papers each day and more than 40 million student papers are in its archive. The company claims that more than 50% of plagiarism is from copying the work of other students.

Four high school students have turned the tables, saying in a legal suit that turnitin.com is infringing on the copyright of the students because their papers uploaded to the site are saved and these archived papers are searched as part of identifying copying. The students are seeking $900,000 in damages.

The company's defense is that the students agreed to release the company from liability by checking a box to that affect when submitting a paper. Of course, if the teacher requires that all papers be submitted to turnitin.com, the students' only other choice than to check the box is to fail.

Testing the marking machine

The Educational Testing Service in the U.S. has developed essay marking software called Criterion. When his university was considering signing on to the service, writing instructor Andy Jones decided to test the software. He took a letter of recommendation he had written, replaced the student's name with a few words from a Criterion writing prompt, and substituted "chimpanzee" for every "the," according to a report in *NEA Today*.

Criterion marked it as a 6 out of 6 and said it was "cogent" and "well articulated." The program uses word patterns to make its judgment. Even one of the developers says that it can't tell whether an argument is sound. "Man bites dog" is just as sensible as "dog bites man."

Fingerprints on the pizza

A new technology charges student accounts directly for the food they buy — with a quick scan of their fingerprints. It is being used in some schools, according to the NEA, the largest teacher union in the U.S. In one California school district, the fingerprint calls up the student's name and ID, teacher's name and how much the student owes.

The manufacturers of the technology give assurances that the fingerprints are not nearly police quality. They didn't say whether that meant that the wrong students might sometimes be charged for someone else's food. Some schools deactivated the technology when they found it might violate state laws that prohibit using biometric information without the permission of parents.

A system operating in Britain takes the matter a step further. Computer software that helps schools meet tougher nutritional regulations for schools can also use the information to report to parents on the nutritional choices of their children. The head of the parents association said it was a good idea, but one that would be hated by students.

"Bad educators" exclude Wikipedia

Some teachers think that Wikipedia is a bad encyclopedia because anyone can write entries on it and that it may not be accurate. One teacher librarian has posted on all library computers a sign saying "Just Say 'No' to Wikipedia."

Jimmy Wales, one of the creators of the Wikipedia, says that teachers who won't let students use it are "bad educators." Wales also said the site probably isn't appropriate for academics — they should do their own research.

Bush pushes COW curriculum

One of the Bush brothers, Neil Bush, is the president of Ignite!Learning, a company that is selling a computerized curriculum called Curriculum on Wheels (COW). You might wonder about his qualifications for creating curriculum software. Bush acknowledges he has no experience in pedagogy or software development, but says he was a boy with dyslexia.

COW is actually a hard drive with lessons for a year of science or social studies, with math under development. All the lessons are done in short cartoons, song and on occasion, straight lecture. The cost is $3800 for the machine and

a license for $1000 a year of use. Bush claims that 2300 U.S. public schools have it and it is being marketed in Asia and the Middle East.

Bush's mother has helped marketing as well. She made a donation to a relief fund for Hurricane Katrina. However, it was on the condition that some of the money be used to buy COW's for the Houston schools that had taken in students seeking refuge from the hurricane. The company runs an adopt-a-COW program that encourages corporations to buy the program for local schools. It is mostly oil companies that have responded.

More curriculum as business

A corporation called K12 Inc. has contracted with many charter schools in seventeen states to provide their curriculum. K12 spokesman, Jeff Kwitowski, claims "we are a vendor and no different from thousands of other companies that provide products and services to districts and schools."

K12 Inc. became a public company early in 2008. It issued 6 million shares at a price of $18 each for a total of $108 million to be used to expand internationally. Watch for it in your neighbourhood.

Tutoring from a distance

The *No Child Left Behind* law in the U.S. requires that school districts provide free tutoring if large numbers of students are underperforming. While teachers must have a certificate to teach, tutors hired by private tutoring companies don't have to meet any qualification requirements.

One state alone, Massachusetts, spent over $21 million over three years, with no way of knowing whether the tutoring does any good. While much of the tutoring is done at centres convenient to shopping malls, some of it is being done over the Internet.

The U.S. chains, such as Sylvan, offer Internet tutoring for about $50 an hour. Their prices, though, are being undercut by online tutoring from India. With highly qualified people in large numbers, but low wages, several companies have set up shop to provide online tutoring. Indian entrepreneur Krishna Ganesh has started a service that charges a flat $99 a month with as many 45-minute sessions as the student organized. He told the *New York Times* that "our vision is to be part of the monthly budget of one million families."

Tests all wet

More than 4400 students applying for college are getting payments of $275 or more for errors made in marking the exams. Students who had greater harm than just a lower score can make a claim for more. This would be for students who missed out on test-based scholarships or paid for coaching

courses to increase their scores because of the wrong scores.

The College Board, which administers the test, said the problem was caused by some answer sheets absorbing "abnormal high moisture content" that threw off the optical scanner that scores the tests.

Fairtest, the organization that tracks the testing business, says "no conclusive explanation has ever been provided for where the water came from or how papers from across the country were contaminated."

Read a story to your great-great-grandkids — gravely

The virtual human interaction lab at Stanford University has created three-dimensional digitized models customized with people's facial characteristics and mannerisms. According to the Mail and Guardian, the lab director, Jeremy Bailenson, says "you can make a digital version of you that is animated so your grandkids' grandkids could put on a helmet and you can read them a story from the grave."

Education Roundup is compiled by Larry Kuehn. References to items covered in the Roundup are available by email from larry.kuehn@gmail.com

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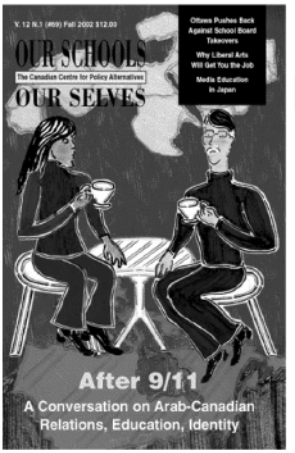

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