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Debate Over Education in the Future Should Start Now

Adapted from *The China Post News*

What will education for the next generation be like?

In many ways it is an easy question. The classrooms of the future will be increasingly digitized. E-readers will replace bulky text books, taking huge burdens off students' backs — literally. Teaching methods will be more interconnected, with the Internet playing a substantial part in the process. Students will interact less like competitors and more like a team. In a program that has already been pioneered in Taiwan, teachers encourage students to discuss school projects in online chatrooms. Some forward-thinking Taiwanese teachers are also trying to make their classes more question-and-action based, asking students to tackle puzzles that can be solved in more than one way.

These classroom advancement predictions, however, scratch only the surface. In a world radically revolutionized by the Internet, education will face more profound changes than hardware upgrades. In a time when wearable computers and even embedded human computers are no longer merely the subject of science fiction, modern education models based on Victorian traditions and ancient Chinese norms quickly become outdated.

One obvious question is why are students still required to spend years learning to add numbers up and memorizing facts when they have computers and Google at their fingertips. Ian Livingstone, a computer game entrepreneur behind titles like “Tomb Raider,” recently questioned British schools still requiring students to “sit quietly in isolation while someone at the front talks at them — asking them to note down things which they can always Google at any time.”

“I think you should take facts as a given — you don't need to cram your own hard drive, you brain, with all this data that you could just access at a click of the mouse,” he said. Livingstone advocates a more interactive way of learning by using — not surprisingly — games as a medium of study and has planned to set up free schools to experiment with his ideas.

Switching boring spoon-fed education with “enjoyable” classes featuring computer games — e.g. using Angry Birds to teach the physics of trajectory — sounds like a dream-come-true for students. But things are more complicated. The memorizing of some facts, such as the exact dates of historical events, should be consigned to history. Facts, however, are not just facts. They sometimes are the compass and anchor in the journey to knowledge and inspiration. Google may be at one's fingertips but it is a database of information that requires active search input, not a substitution of a person's knowledge base. You still need to know something to know what to search for.

Future education should move away from fact-based mechanical memorization toward a more active curriculum. The key is in deciding what kinds of knowledge and facts a student should learn by heart and in implementing the substantial change in education philosophy. In Taiwan, educators are progressing away from the old way of mathematics education of training students to solve problems as fast as possible to teaching them the mechanics behind the adding and multiplying of numbers. Such constructive mathematics education, however, faces backlash from parents who are used to the old method. In addition,

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Taiwan's heavily fact-based national examination system still serves the progressive program.

Education reforms, however, should not be a dash to “fun classrooms.” Enjoyment and interaction should not be regarded as an end in itself but as a means to inspire and enlighten students. Future classrooms should also not be bookless. In fact, the reduction on repetitive fact-ingesting opens up students' time and attention to “slow subjects” such as art and literature. In a world where one's smartwatch fights for attention with one's smartshoe, smartglasses or smartphone, a bit of school time to “sit quietly in isolation” could be truly educational.

The bottom line is that as computers are taking away the repetitive mental and physical heavy labor from human beings, education no longer needs to be about turning people into “useful” resources for the society. Future schools should be a place where people are enlightened, inspired and challenged to think on the big (but not necessarily career-promoting) questions of life.

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 - use well-structured sentences and language that are appropriate for your audience. (70%)

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