

‘A person who combats his own urges will be eternally rewarded with the consciousness of a higher, inner strength.’

24 Can EUED Make You Ill?

The question of whether EUED itself is a disease I will leave to the experts, but one thing is certain: EUED *can make you ill*.

It is a serious matter. It concerns the way we use television, computers, the Internet, mobile telephones and other electronic devices and the content of mass communication. In a certain respect they are all part of a single phenomenon: people *immersing themselves in an artificial world with the help of electronic technology*. For that reason I think I am justified in dealing with the whole area as a unity. It will be easy for the reader to infer at any point which medium my arguments are specifically directed at.

What is indisputable is that, to live in our society, young people must familiarise themselves with computers and the Internet. They should learn as early as possible to use a keyboard properly, not just with one or two fingers. They should be able to find useful information and use electronic technology to solve all kinds of problems. That is relatively straightforward and simply a matter of sensible planning.

But as teachers we are faced with the problem of how this new technology can be *used constructively* and how any possible *psychological and physical harm can be avoided*. For, unfortunately, experience has shown that these machines can be used to an extent that is excessive and unhealthy, and the content can take hold of users in a way that is morally dubious and have a negative influence. In such cases we can talk of *Excessive Use of Electronic Devices*, which I have abbreviated to EUED.

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The reason why people succumb to EUED lies in the extraordinary fascination of the often fantastic opportunities offered by modern computer and information technology. The world around almost ceases to exist. All our senses, all our emotions, all our will, all our imagination, all our longings are monopolised by what is happening on the screen and the sound accompanying it. Hunger and thirst are forgotten, not to mention obligations outside the world in which we are engaged body and soul.

But what is it that creates this fascination? The way I see it is:

- The world that modern technology conjures up on our screens, in our headphones or VR helmets *presents the illusion of life*, passes itself off as life. We see other worlds, other people, fantastic beings, we can hear them and talk to them, even though they are not there in reality. What we see flashing across the screen is not real life. The appearance of some being is not a birth and its disappearance not a death; getting bigger is not growth and distortion no illness. The vibrations of the loudspeaker membrane are not human speech and the amazing ability to solve problems not thought. The artificial beings are not self-aware, living, feeling organisms. But the illusion fascinates us.
- The possibilities offered by electronic technology appear to liberate us from the basic categories of existence: *time and space*. These become relative, almost meaningless. We can practically be anywhere in the world at the same time, virtual participants in everything. In general terms the new technology makes a huge increase in the pace of life possible, in that it encourages a tendency, which is obviously deeply rooted in human nature, towards rapid changes of situation, towards intoxication with speed.
- The artificial world made possible by electronics allows the individual to extend his sphere of control enormously. He has almost everything at his fingertips— every piece of music, every piece of information, every picture, every film. Anything that promises pleasure can be consumed immediately and at little effort. Also one can solve problems, which in the past were practically insoluble, almost *en passant* with

a few keystrokes. We can have hordes of people at our disposal as well: we press a key and the other person will talk to us as a matter of course, wherever he is and whatever he's doing. And, thanks to the virtuoso programming techniques of the specialists, with very little effort we can create all sorts of creatures, situations, actions or whole worlds and give them the features or modes of behaviour which suit us. We are able, in a way, to play at being God, being the Creator.

- Another fascinating aspect is the *combat strategy* on which most computer games are based, either against oneself, as in solitaire, against another mind, as in chess, or against an evil enemy in war games. Seen from that perspective, it is not mere chance that male computer users more often become addicted than girls and women.
- Finally, the very fact that technology can produce such *marvels* is fascinating in itself. We are gripped by the stories used, the tasks set and by the feeling of success when we have solved a problem, but we are also engrossed by the things the programmers think up, the perfection with which they have been executed and also, it appears, by the intoxicating background noise.

The extent to which EUED is *harmful* cannot be determined objectively, since any harm that occurs only affects specific individuals and they might learn from experience. What is necessary is to point out *dangers*, and in that respect we must distinguish between dangers inherent in EUED itself and dangers inherent in using particular content. First of all, the fundamental dangers, without regard to specific content:

- In general, when using electronic devices we remain aware in one way or another that we are living in an artificial world. But anyone who is addicted to EUED will become increasingly caught up in an *unreal world* and be in danger of gradually *losing the ability to distinguish between reality and illusion*. The Japanese boy who wanted to play at being Superman and jumped out of a high-rise building illustrates the extreme. A realistic view of oneself is replaced by fantasies of omnipotence. Anyone who lives in an unreal world will gradually lose their

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essential contact with the real world and will develop little inclination to accept responsibility in it.

- Anyone who spends hours, or even days sitting at a computer screen must expect eventual *eye and posture problems*. In addition there is optical and acoustic *over-stimulation*, caused by crazy flickering and infernal noise, which can cause general nervousness, insomnia or other health problems. Overtiredness can impair concentration and excessive time spent on the computer can lead to neglect of normal obligations. Not least this can affect behaviour in class and school work.
- It is only a short step from EUED to actual *addiction*. Addiction to computers, the Internet, games, shares the familiar problems of other addictions: complete dependence, loss of contact with reality, physical harm.
- EUED *prevents* children from occupying themselves with activities which are important for their healthy psychological development, simply through lack of time and energy. It is practical things that become neglected, for example reading books, conversations and communal activities with family and friends, practising a musical instrument, going for walks, occupying themselves with plants and animals.
- By their very nature young people tend to be susceptible to mass phenomena and manipulation by fashionable trends. Modern mass communications encourage a trend towards uniform thought and influence children and adolescents subliminally into a particular way of thinking and behaving. These trends run counter to the educational goal of enabling pupils to think for themselves and act on their own initiative.

In addition there are the dangers which come from specific games, images and manipulative Internet sites. It is not surprising that these modern lifestyle aids bear the stamp of mankind — they have everything from the highest to the lowest. They can foster a sense of community and they can serve gangs of crooks. Via the Internet one can find out and talk about basic questions of philosophy and theology, about

art and literature; one can also sink into the deepest mire of depravity and criminality. There are all kinds of 'scenes' and the danger for our children is that they will be drawn into one of the pernicious scenes and get stuck there. For example: pornography of all kinds, violence, drugs, rebellion against all authority, fraud, political extremism, racism, encouragement to commit suicide.

Anyone who plays down the problem by objecting that these things have always existed, is missing an important difference. In the past, participation in one of these 'scenes', even establishing a connection with it, took a great effort just finding information. For my generation, for example, drugs were not an issue because we knew nothing about the drug scene of the time and would have found it almost impossible to gain access to it anyway. It is their easy availability that has made drugs a problem. The Internet has made information about everything, not just about useful things, *extremely accessible*. Minimal movements of the right index finger are enough to take one to the relevant web pages and from there one can be guided right round the 'scene'. And all this can happen without the parents noticing anything at all. Normal curiosity can be the start of a fatal slide into a pernicious 'scene'.

As an example we can take the 'Pro Ana' webpages. On them anorexic young girls encourage each other in their determination to avoid eating until they are nothing but skin and bone. Some have their own websites which are cleverly seductive. The illness, *anorexia nervosa*, is personified and appears as Ana, a helpful friend: 'Hi, let me introduce myself. My name's Anorexia Nervosa, but you can call me Ana. I hope we're going to be good friends.' The girls are told how to conceal Ana from their parents. There are competitions to see who can lose the most weight. For these girls, being Ana means belonging to a sworn community which keeps itself secret from the world outside and has only *one* goal: to eat nothing at all, or as little as possible. 'Don't you dare even go close to food!' it says in large letters on one of these websites and, on another, 'You can never be too thin.' And any girl who 'weakens' or, even worse, tells her parents, is branded a renegade, a traitor. Not surprisingly the clinics that specialise in this illness are full to bursting and dealing with younger and younger girls and more and more difficult cases. And the cost of healthcare is going up and up.

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As this example suggests, the time is ripe for a wider discussion of a topic that has been practically excluded from educational discourse: *seduction*. In my opinion the Internet and certain computer games represent an immense machinery of seduction, far beyond anything there has ever been before. And the seductive force is so great that well-meaning parents, who want to bring up their children to the best of their ability, are powerless against it.

And that brings us to the question of how schools should deal with these phenomena and problems.

It is the same as with all social problems: we need a twofold strategy. On the one hand we must employ any countermeasures available, on the other we must seek out the causes of the problem and try to deal with them. In public discussions these two strategies tend to be regarded as mutually exclusive. I see this as mistaken, not because I think one of the standpoints is wrong, but because of the way both sides make a point of rejecting their 'opponent's' position as ineffective. But organisms, and likewise any social structure, can only survive if — however difficult it is — they satisfy *both* requirements: to remove harmful causes by developing positive strategies and to ward off negative influences.

Let us begin with the second. What countermeasures should we take? Immediately I hear the standard cry of: 'Bans are ineffective!' I see that in less absolute terms: bans alone are not effective enough. But they do have a certain effectiveness — provided in the first place that we are convinced we have the right to ban something and in the second that we have the determination to carry the ban through. The legislators clearly share this point of view and have banned the glorification of violence and child pornography. And the state quite rightly punishes those who flout these laws.

Now it is in the nature of the Internet that bans can hardly be implemented against the *producers* of criminal material. Provided they have the knowledge, anyone can distribute their material over the World Wide Web from almost anywhere on earth, they do not need an ISP. And they can do it in states where the authorities themselves are corrupt or which lack the means to take effective measures against them. Thus well-regulated states with their laws based on human rights are sidestepped and any crook has access to any child's bedroom,

however remote. Despite that, every state should take all the steps that lie within its power.

Since the amount of seductive material available can only be prevented to a limited extent, all that is left — unfortunately — is to make its improper use a punishable offence. Various states have done this in the case of child pornography.

Schools also have some scope for regulation. It is my view that there should be restrictions on the use of mobile telephones and other electronic devices within the whole school area, even a complete ban if need be. That is what happens today in many workplaces, on the principle of: ‘You were taken on to be *present* with your *attention* and your *labour*.’ And something similar is true of schools: ‘You come to school to be *present* and to concentrate on what is required of you.’ It is true that there will always be recalcitrant pupils who have never learnt to regard a ban as binding on everyone and can send text messages with their hands in their pockets. But they won’t be able to use the little screen to show off their latest pictures.

In January 2007 both the combined pupils’ organisations in Switzerland and the umbrella organisation of Swiss teachers spoke out in the press against the ban on mobile telephones that had been introduced in certain schools. Both used the same argument, namely that young people ought to learn at school how to use mobile phones sensibly. We have here a prime example of the way the two standpoints — getting to the causes and setting limits — are seen as mutually exclusive.

That the pupils are against the regulation is not surprising, but it is astonishing for the teachers to take the same line. It is certainly correct to say that pupils should ‘learn to use mobile telephones sensibly’, it sounds good and puts anyone who says that in a superior moral position. But one does wonder whether those who use that argument are not deceiving themselves. Equipping pupils with knowledge and technical skills is one thing, but trying to influence their moral behaviour is entirely different. In the first case success is largely in our own hands, in the second, however, the outcome of our efforts is uncertain because an individual’s morality is a matter of his own free decision. However convincingly we describe what it means to use a mobile sensibly, the pupils’ behaviour is to a large extent outside our influence. That means

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that, despite the teachers' determination to teach them the sensible use of a mobile telephone, many will not act on it.

If this did not have serious repercussions for our work in the classroom, we could let the matter rest, rather in the same way as we do as a matter of course with questions such as healthy eating, handling tobacco and alcohol, conservation, sexuality. On those topics, too, we try to teach our pupils what is sensible, but how far they will behave sensibly is outside our influence.

But unreasonable use of mobile telephones does hamper our work in the classroom. Even if we manage (by a ban, of course) to stop phones signalling a call during lessons, the conversations, text messages, pictures and videos the technology can receive will capture the pupils' emotional life to such an extent that it will be difficult to get them to concentrate on their work. Also the openness to new things discussed in Chapter 11 will be a complete illusion. One only has to imagine everything that can be done with mobiles during the twenty minutes of break and how it will still be buzzing around in the class in the next lesson to wonder how, in such conditions, productive educational work can take place.

I also believe that the restriction of the use of mobile telephones within the school area that I am recommending here would contribute to the very desirable goal of helping the pupils to handle this advanced technological device properly.

I consider that a similar regulation to this in respect of the school's computers is also advisable. They should be set up, supervised and checked in such a way that misuse is at least very difficult.

Of course, these measures alone will not solve the problem. The most we can do is to prevent the worst effects. In fact I do not believe that the problems I have addressed here can be solved as a whole. It is the way things are: we have always had to reap what we sow. All we can expect are partial successes which will help at least some young people to find a better way in life.

That leaves us with the principal question teachers must ask themselves: *What positive, constructive measures can protect children from EUED and its negative consequences?*

The first advice we are always given is: *information*. Behind that is the old illusion that rational insight is the main motive for acting

sensibly. If someone knows something is harmful, they will avoid it. If only things were like that! Unfortunately information often produces the opposite result, for it make susceptible pupils aware of the phenomenon and all its possibilities and — out of curiosity, perhaps urged on by an inclination to do the opposite of what they are told — they will experiment and, if it comes to the worst, get stuck with it. It is naive to think that a complex problem like EUED can be solved by passing on the relevant information.

The motives for acting in a way that is morally good lie in our inner being. Therefore one can only tackle the problem adequately if the development of the pupils' inner being is accepted and realised as a fundamental goal of teaching throughout the school. Every specific problem — dealing with other people, with sexuality, with fashion, the media, drugs, the Internet, mobile phones — can only be tackled successfully through education if the positive foundations have been sufficiently developed. And these foundations consist of the all-round, harmonious development of head, heart and hand which, following Pestalozzi, has been the theme of this book.

If, in this process, we do not simply *provide* information for the pupils, but *discuss* it with them, we will be moving in the right direction. Discussion does not proceed solely on the objective level, but allows all those concerned to express themselves subjectively. What we are dealing with here are embarrassment, fears, hopes, expectations, help, experiences, encounters. Good discussion creates an atmosphere of acceptance and stimulates the good side of all involved. If there is a real teacher in the classroom, and not just a subject-transmission machine, then frequent discussion will be at the heart of his teaching. And this kind of discussion is the vessel in which all the problems affecting the pupils can be considered in a spirit of mutual acceptance, even friendship. Thus we can talk openly and honestly about seduction, which exists in other areas apart from EUED, and demonstrate the sensible use of electronic devices. In this the teacher has the right — and the duty even — to become involved as a person: with the whole weight of his experience of life and his authority resting on his trustworthiness. For true education, which can change and develop people from inside, is always founded on personal relationships. For these reasons discussion,

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understood in the right spirit, is the only way open to schools of protecting their pupils from EUED or persuading them to give it up. There is no guarantee it will be successful.

This brings us back once more to the point of the problematic nature of the system of using specialist subject teachers, which becomes increasingly general at precisely the age at which EUED can become acute. In which subject should the process I describe above be carried out? In the classes on the mother tongue, of course, or in those other subjects that deal with the real world, citizenship or whatever the subjects are called. But there is no question that a teacher who takes the whole range, or most, of the subjects with a class is in a better position. Finally, we must face up to the fact that schools have a double role to fulfil: to transmit knowledge and skills, and to contribute to children's upbringing. As far as the transmission of knowledge and skills is concerned, the system of subject teachers has the advantage that a specialist is taking the class; but as far as contributing to the children's upbringing is concerned, the class teacher is in the better position, since he has much greater opportunity of forming a personal relationship with each pupil. Bearing the current pressing social problems in mind, those in charge of educational policy would be well advised to review their preferences.