I just finished titled "Picture a World Without Pens, Pencils, and Paper: The unanticipated Future of Reading and Writing" by Karen Bromley. In the paper, she explores three ideas: "(a) Pens, pencils and paper will soon be artifacts of the past; (b) Electronic reading and writing will be pervasive, collaborative, and social events; and (c) Speech will replace most writing" (Bromley, 2010, p. 97). I shuddered as I read this, thinking that this is the path to the dystopian future that so many Sci-fi movies and books depict.

While there can be no doubt that there is and will be change, I struggle with such an extreme view. Predicting the future is difficult (impossible?) and often times a linear extrapolation of the current state is used to make bold statements about the future state. E-readers and digital books are growing rapidly – so let's extend that growth rate out for x years and proclaim that all books will be consumed this way. The internet takes the world by storm, let's assume that all communication will occur via the internet. I'm not in any way a luddite – I embrace computing, software and technology - but I do struggle with simplistic views that produce silly predictions.

In defending this view of the future (no pens, no paper books, no writing), the author brings up software development: "Other examples of this new process, called open-source development, point to the future of writing. Open-source material is content that users can use, change, improve, and redistribute on the Internet" (Bromley, 2010, p101). While this is not incorrect, it is incomplete. Software development uses many analog tools – paper, pencils, pen, paper notebooks, whiteboards, yarn(!), sticky notes, painter's tape and Sharpies. Somewhere along the line, Office Depot, 3M and Staples became the official sponsors of developers worldwide. Go figure.

Bromley also takes an extreme view when it comes to education: "K-16 teachers will need to encourage and recognize digital creations as valid demonstrations of literacy. Today, many researchers, teachers and students routinely create multimedia projects with hypertext. In the future, developmental literacy courses like 'Writing with Video' may routinely take the place of 'Freshman Composition 1010" (Bromley, 2010, p. 105). I could see value in having both, but why would a course on communicating with video replace a class on composition? I look forward to seeing more variety in approaches and support for personalized learning. The idea that I would "have" to create a video rather than write a paper would annoy me. Having the option sounds great – as some will appreciate communicating with video – but assuming that there is a single learning path / approach is unnecessarily limiting.

As I step off my digital soap-box, perhaps it's best to state that perhaps this paper is a good example of 'technological determinism' unnecessarily depicting these changes as "… unstoppable: their 'progress' inevitable, unavoidable and irreversible" (Chandler 1995)?

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References

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