The Medium is a Mere Vehicle

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The article originally published in 1983 by Clark and republished in 2001 examined media’s effect on learning. His conclusion affirmed that there was no significant difference (NSD) in the learning benefits obtained through one medium over another. This determination continues to be debated within the IT community today.

Clark’s article argued that “media do not influence learning under any conditions” and that “media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement” (p. 2). He provided an analogy to illustrate this point. The type of delivery truck used to deliver goods does not determine the quality of the goods. It is the goods themselves that determine quality, and the means by which the goods are presented. Therefore, a learner does not learn more effectively by means of the media utilized; the success of learning is determined by the content of the material, and the methodology used by the teacher to motivate successful learning. “It is what the teacher does – the teaching – that influences learning” (p. 9). Clark’s point makes sense although his analogy trivializes and oversimplifies the complexity of the issue.

Clark analyzed and discredited studies in favor of the influence of media in learning. He explained that “new” media initially tend to attract and improve learning over conventional methods, yet once the novelty of the media wears off, student achievement is the same. With contemporary studies that claimed improved learning from computers, Clark argued that the research approaches employed in these studies were similar in content to studies done earlier analyzing the mediums of radio and television and their effects on learning which concluded that there was “no significant difference” in learning between media and conventional methods (p. 4).

Because of this, Clark recommended that future research in media focus on “necessary characteristics of instructional methods . . . (task, learner aptitude, and attributions), which are more fruitful sources for understanding achievement increases” (p. 10). “The method, aptitude, and task variables of instruction” are issues that Clark suggested merited further investigation (p. 9) rather than the decades old research that has, as he pointed out, consistently proven that there exists no benefit in learning from specific media.
Clark added that if one investigates published reports on the issue, one will find that published articles underscore the advantages media has on learning. He questioned the relevance of the articles by noting that “journal editors typically select research that finds stronger effects for new media” (p. 8) and that if one compares conclusions made in reference to this issue between published and unpublished reports, only .6 percent indicate an advantage in media enhanced instruction over conventional instruction.

Media is effective in learning and many times improves the learning experience. I agree with Clark that the methodology employed while using the media is most important. Any teacher can complement their teaching with audio and visual aids, but the aids will not contribute to effective learning, they complement the teacher. If the material is dull and monotonous, it is up to the teacher to present it in an appealing and diverse fashion. The media employed may contribute to effective learning but relies totally on the content, design, and delivery strategy developed by the teacher and/or the media designer, and the approach utilized in the instruction. The media alone does not enhance learning, the methods and conditions of instruction do.

In addition, behind every medium, there are corporations with millions of dollars at stake. Profit is their ultimate goal. Effective promotion of their product depends on providing evidence that claims the superiority of their media for successful learning. They quote those studies that “prove” the medium’s value, and obviously conceal negative studies. This is one of the main reasons why this issue will continue to be debated until, as Clark stated, “a novel theory is suggested” (p. 10).
References