Clark claimed that there are no learning benefits to be had from any medium used for any instructional purpose for any learners in any setting. The “grocery truck” analogy said that, “The best current evidence is that media are mere vehicles that that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than a truck that delivers our groceries causes nutrition. He went on to say that there were significant “economic” benefits, but not ones that significantly contributed to unique learning.

Can you imagine being the heads of a marketing departments of newly developed software or hardware that had billed their products as “having the ability to change the educational realm in a way never seen before”? Imagine the panic: years and years of development time, millions of dollars in investment, some company’s ultimate success or demise riding on the hopes of this particular product.

They really needn’t have worried (at least in corporate America). The truth is people like gadgets; new toys. It never really mattered whether there was a real use for it or if the “extra options” would ever be used. Everyone wanted to have the newest “time machine”, and let’s be honest, everyone had the money to do so at the time. Budgets were expansive and tastes were a lot less discriminating. Not enough was known. Every piece of media introduced at trade shows caused collective and resonating “oohs” and “aaahs”. The “I have GOT to have that” syndrome was born. Need was created where there was none. People convinced themselves that the “economical benefits” equaled performance improvement and unrivaled student achievement. Which was just what the marketing people sold them.

The people that bought into the erroneous equation, “New gadget = Economical Benefits = Better Learning”, found Clark’s statements difficult to accept. I attempt to use his analogy to peel the skin from the grape.

One could argue that because the grocery truck is built to specifically tote grocery to someone who will consume it, that it is best suited to do the job well. Below, I have examples of 4 state of the art “grocery trucks”. All built to do the same thing...deliver groceries. Ponder the questions:

- Truck #1 - What if the groceries in this truck are of poor value, the lettuce is wilted, the tomatoes were over-ripened and the peaches were bruised?

- Truck #2 - What if the customer was expecting all leafy green vegetables, but this grocery truck instead delivered wholesome fresh squash, zucchini, and peppers?

- Truck #3 - What if this grocery truck had everything the customer ordered, but delivered to the wrong address?
Truck #4 - What if this grocery truck died in the middle of midtown traffic in 90 degree weather?

The “truck” is different, but it is not the vehicle itself that makes the difference. You will probably find that you could get a Yugo (one that actually works) to deliver the same groceries if the person who took the order did it correctly, if the person who packed and shipped did their job well, and you had a competent driver who could follow directions; If the groceries were in the quantity that could be contained in that particular car, if the groceries were of the type and caliber expected; if you asked the customer specifically what they wanted, and then measured and ensured customer satisfaction at the time of delivery and afterwards.

Of course, that’s the Cliff Notes version. There is so much more to making coursework maximize performance, but you understand my analogy I think.