Part A

Can students be well rounded in a flat world? I believe that this was the most intriguing of the five questions. I feel that the lazy answer is “no”. How can students be as “well rounded” as previous generations when technology controls everything and little or no actual work is required of anyone anymore? We have some such as Neil Postman claiming we will be “ruined” as a society if we continue to implement too much technology in twenty-first century education and not return to the basics. We also have avid supporters of technology, such as Bill Gates, telling us that technology is at its greatest and will only get better. These same people are important players in the curriculum development centered on and around technology and information. We are educating students in an age when any information we want, need, or could have ever imagined existed, is at our fingertips instantly. I feel that with our technological sophistication comes a great sense of responsibility to keep our students “well rounded”. This responsibility especially falls into the laps of parents and educators.

Although I do not agree with many of his arguments, Postman makes some wonderful points in Building a Bridge to the 18th Century. He is worried that information has become so accessible that our learning and education has been watered down. Children are being raised by a television or monitor screen. They have the world at their fingertips, through a push of a button or a click of the mouse. Although they have access to all sorts of useful information, not all information presented should be assumed as “good” information. Much of what is on the television and Internet is worthless. This is where parents and educators must take over. We must supervise and choose information that will enhance the educational experience, not replace it. Students shouldn’t be learning content and skills from a box, but that very same box may offer opportunities to practice these skills and share them with others around the world. Information and technology needs to help what is being taught transcend within the educational experience.

Technology and information transmission should function as entertainment in context. We need to keep connections alive between curriculum and our students or we will suffer the “evils” that John Dewey wrote about. One of the most amusing situations, in my opinion, to arise from this “Age of Information” has to be the outcry of parents wanting the government to patrol, or maybe as Diane Ravitch would describe as “police”, the content of television shows and Internet sites. Yes, I am sure that it is true that there are entirely inappropriate shows and websites that children should never view. But televisions and computers have power buttons, turn them off or tell them NO! Parents have the ability to supervise what their child is viewing. Parents need to make it part of their job to know what their children are watching, playing, or what personal information they are sharing with others (especially on the Internet). In addition to parental supervision, teachers hold responsibility for what information they choose to share with their students. As educators, we need to know the quality of the information that we
provide our students with. We need to use quality information to add more to a lesson rather than showing a movie (i.e. a movie depicting a historical event) to replace the lesson. Responsibility with information is one step toward keeping our children “well rounded”.

Another way to keep our children from “flattening” is to adjust our societal views of learning. Dewey explored this concept and how it affects what children learn. If we expect students to spout off facts on a test, then that is what they will do. Will this “round” them? Mr. Esquith inundated his classroom environment with quality literature, studies in the Arts, algebra, music instruction, and life skills. In _Spellbound_, the children spent extensive time studying for the local and national bees. This showed what our society deems as “learning”. They were taught how to spell, they studied hard, and were able to compete. But in addition to the time spent perfecting their obvious gifts in spelling, many of the children were taking music lessons, playing sports, participating on Math Leagues, etc. I believe, and feel that many would agree, that our children need to be challenged, inspired, motivated and have dreams in order to succeed in life. Thomas Friedman begins his book _The World is Flat_ with a discussion of and interesting way in which societal success is measured. He reveals that one of the most important indicators of a thriving society is whether it has “more memories than dreams or more dreams than memories”. Societies without dreams (like the United States) will keep making the same mistakes over and over and will not progress properly. The hold onto their memories of “what was” and do not dare enough to dream of “what could be”. The same can be said of students. We as educators and parents need to teach our children to set lofty goals and work toward achieving them. We need to keep high expectations and not settle for mediocrity. As the famous saying goes, “If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.”

In conclusion, I feel that this society and some of its most important participants, parents and educators, will be able to teach our children how to face the challenges they will encounter in our “flat” world. It will take a lot of work, but we can work together to keep them “well rounded”.
Part B

I reviewed a few of the websites because they all seemed very interesting. Although I found value in each of the sites I visited, one in particular struck me. Ironically, “Teaching Within and Beyond the Mandated Curriculum in a Fifth Grade Language Arts Classroom” seemed most useful to me because of my sparked interest in extending my own fourth/fifth grade curriculum after reading Rafe Esquith’s book about all that he has done “outside” of his mandates to enhance his students’ educational experience. It was ironic because Esquith was not a particularly enthusiastic supporter of what the Internet has to offer in a classroom, and in ways reflected some of Neil Postman’s views on our twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I am interested in finding ways to keep my students “well rounded” in our “flat world” much like Esquith, but I do not want to denounce technology and its uses, like Postman. I feel that technology and information’s transportation due to technological advances have an important role in the education of our children. I would like to incorporate classical views of education in addition to the ways technology may possible enhance the classics. Throughout my exploration “inside” the teaching of Amelia Coleman, I kept in mind the judging criteria for the “Webby Awards” and how they applied to her hypermedia presentation.

Coleman, or AC as she was referred to within the website, had an interesting hypermedia representation of her classroom. The site was very clear and easy to navigate. The format or structure (which I assume is the product of the site’s free set-up software available to contributors), was somewhat simple, but it kept the information where it needed to be, in the forefront of accessibility and not lost amidst an ocean of graphics, advertisements, and the other unnecessary “dressing” other sites use. Her links were labeled clearly and nothing was left to interpretation. Everything seemed properly prioritized according to their usefulness within the experience. Yet, the visual design of the site left quite bit to be desired. It had color and straight lines, some pictures, but it was mostly a “document-style” page. I am not quite sure what could have been added within the site planning on the software, but I do know that it did not catch my eye for presentation.

Within the realm of content, she included videos of actual lessons and an interview about her teaching techniques. She also included examples and images of student work. This is the area where I feel the site was so successful in bringing a hypermedia reader “inside teaching”. It is one thing to read or hear about how a lesson should be taught or how it was taught by someone, but it is quite another to witness the actual lesson and read the resulting student work. This made me feel a part of the learning experience and helped “connect” me to the class. The videos and examples enhanced the content and made the experience “real” and engaging.

One major complaint that I had about the site was that there were not many hyperlinks. Maybe I have been spoiled by the offerings of this course’s format, but I really enjoy having appropriate and quality information at my fingertips, ready to be clicked. I benefit from the opportunity to immediately connect to relevant material. AC
included some valuable resources such as her district’s website and The Writing Project link on the Resources page. But I feel that more attention could have been paid to hyperlinking within her main pages to her resources. Her site was just not effectively interactive enough. It would have created a stronger “connection” for me to be able to immediately view her district’s Language Arts benchmarks upon her first reference of them. Instead, I explored them after she told and showed me how she incorporates and extends upon them. I would have like reading descriptions of her lessons and then having the opportunity to click on the videos and student work examples within the descriptions.

I would have also liked to experience or “hypermedia read” more about the assessments she faces, their format, and how her invented and expanded curriculum prepares her students for district and state assessments. I also would have liked to see her students’ performance scores in comparison to her district and state. This would have added needed credibility to her content. A teacher can claim all day long about what they do in their room and how well they teach and prepare students for tests, but if they cannot provide evidence or document their students’ successes, what is the result? Information. Just plain information that our world and students have too much of, as Neil Postman would describe. As long as her content is lacking credibility, the site will just remain part of the swamp of information on the Internet. With some improvements to the site’s “architecture”, it would truly function as a window through which hypermedia readers could glimpse quality hypermedia representation of classroom techniques, and essentially step “inside teaching”.