I didn’t want to call this column ‘The Information Superhighway’, ‘Schools of the Future’ or ‘Classrooms of Tomorrow’ for a variety of reasons. I think these terms have been done to death and much that has been written under these banners has missed the point of what learning might or should be like in a few years time. The terms ‘school’ and ‘classroom’ are so loaded with historical layers of meaning that they may not accurately convey ideas associated with future learning and teaching situations. I also think that for me to try and do justice to a topic as complex and far reaching as this in five hundred words or less would be very presumptuous.

What I would like to do is simply to preface the much larger debate and exploration of issues that will affect us all as we begin to redefine our roles in response to changes in the way our society carries out its business and its citizens choose to live their lives. Much of what we are currently showcasing as exemplars of future education are what I prefer to call ‘Schools of All the Possible Now’ or ‘Classrooms of the Cashed-up Present’. These occur when we take contemporary shells and saturate them with available information technologies then, lighting the blue touch paper with great fanfare, retire and watch what happens. These are all very interesting and useful in exploring our current options and are important steps along the way, but bear little resemblance to what I believe the ‘school’ will be by early next century.

For a whole range of reasons that I can’t explore in detail here, I picture future ‘schools’ as distributed throughout the local physical communities they directly service as well as having virtual elements and features that will be global in nature. A central community hub, designated information centres, service agencies, workplaces and people’s homes will be the ‘school’. Education and training will be provided in a variety of modes across this distributed school. These modes will include face to face. Our embrace of information technologies does not preclude the continuing need for the human experience of shared learning in ‘real’ as opposed to ‘virtual’ situations. I’m a little tired, as you probably are, of having the old technology replacing the teacher or ‘no need for schools’ chestnuts trotted out when anyone mentions shifts in teaching and learning methodologies associated with information and telecommunications technologies (IT&T).

What will make this possible (what makes it possible now in a reduced sense) is IT&T which will wrench the computer from the desktop and put it in people’s hands and on top of their TV sets, linking it to the broadband and satellite services that will provide our homes, schools and businesses with global connectivity across a broad media spectrum.

This is not science fiction, nor does it represent the thoughts of a committed minority of enthusiasts. This whole debate, thanks in no small measure to the activities of the US Vice-President and our own Prime Minister, is now public.

Will you have cable service in your house in the near future? Prepare for the first wave.