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Using Technology in Language

Abstract

Technology is a major part of students' lives, and their academic training requires an introduction to scholarly uses of technology. It's also part of the classroom: faculty and use tools from multimedia presentations to computer simulations to clickers to enhance their teaching. Instructors don't just experiment with different ways of using technology; they focus on using technology to reach educational goals more effectively and efficiently. This paper focuses on showing why technology plays an important role in teaching, and also how traditional and technological advanced ways of doing things have changed.

Our lives as faculty are full of everyday frustrations, challenges, and unrealized potential. While we have worked out solutions and strategies for dealing with many of these, it is clear that, given the right tools, we could be more efficient and effective. Technology now offers an increasing number of intuitive, reliable, "ready for prime time" tools to help faculty do the things they do every day. Increasingly, faculty wrestle with the idea of incorporating technology into the classroom. We'd like to think, indeed, we are increasingly told, that technology will help all parties concerned.

Faculty are responding to the attention being paid to instructional technology by experimenting more and more. However, with the glut of technologies on the market and the

recognition of early innovators, it is easy to forget that technology is only a tool. The focus often seems to be on technology rather than our teaching objectives. We often feel that we are asked to change our teaching styles and methods to accommodate technology rather than to use technology as a tool to accomplish our goals. Yet, despite the acclaimed ease propounded by so many software developers, we remain frustrated, feeling that the successful use of technology requires time and energy beyond our resources.

Still, we listen to what others are doing. We notice our peers on the cutting edge of this technology—some more vocal than others—and are aware of the increasing attention their use of technology receives during department meetings and in newsletters. We also notice the level of technology proficiency that our students bring to the classroom, where they fully expect us to offer opportunities supported through technology. Administrators love to promote the use of technology to prospective students and to accrediting organizations, and they appreciate the wealth of data that can be gathered through institutional use. Faced with so much optimism, we think, “This makes sense. I really could use some of this technology.” So we begin to ask questions, or we begin to push buttons and open icons on our computer that we have never used before.

Despite the frustration, using technology to help achieve your instructional outcomes can be manageable—and even rewarding—when taken just one piece at a time. Consider, for example, some simple classroom assessment. You may use various techniques now, such as the one-minute paper or a short objective quiz at the end of the class. From this assessment you will learn what your students heard, how they are processing it, and where you might reinforce your delivery or change it, all very useful bits of feedback.

This feedback, however, is costing you time—in class and out of class. Usually, you ask students to do these tasks in class, which takes away from class time. Also, you would probably use paper copies, requiring time at the copier or printer, time to hand out and time to

collect. If you want this experience to be meaningful to—or validated by—your students, you would have to provide feedback to them, the more specific the better, which means more time reading, evaluating, and responding. And still, if you are after higher-order thinking, you have increased the time you need to develop meaningful questions that require application of information rather than soliciting facts. Tempus fugit ,as we all know. With some bits of technology, however, we can make this process more efficient and more effective.

For example students submitting their work in the traditional level was different from the present time. The traditional methods of collecting student work include ,collecting it in class, having students place it under your door, having students send it to or place it in your campus mailbox, and leaving it with a designated secretary. One problem with all of these is in accounting for which students have handed in work and which have not. Collecting assignments in class is the most straightforward, especially if all students hand in the assignment on time and you keep track of who handed it in. Unfortunately, there always seem to be a few stragglers. Even if you have a “no makeups” policy, you will probably have exceptions for documented sickness, death in the family etc., and one or two students may be allowed extensions on each assignment. Unless you are very organized and disciplined, keeping track of who those one or two students are and making sure their assignments are filed with the others once handed in (instead of stuffed in a textbook or in your briefcase with other papers) may put your accounting in question—and with it the integrity of your grading system. And what about the student who says he/she handed the assignment in but you don’t have it? Could another student have removed it from the pile? Could it somehow have ended up in the papers for the committee meeting you attended just after class?

In any case, in-class collection is not a solution when you will not be around (as described in the scenario) when the assignments are to be handed in. In that scenario you need one of the other three collection methods listed above. Of these, the last (leaving it with

a designated secretary) is the most reliable, though it depends on the reliability— and availability—of someone to collect and account for assignments as they come in. A shortcoming of these last three methods is that you have to go to where the assignments were left. Best case, this may mean a (perhaps long) drive to work. Worst case, you are at a conference with some time on your hands between meetings that would be ideal for grading, but you have no way of getting the assignments.

Fortunately, technology allows you to collect assignments in ways that provide both accountability and accessibility. You may, for instance, tell your students that the assignment is to be Emailed to you. So long as you save your Email, receiving an assignment in this fashion means you will always have a copy you can find—even if you missed it initially you can trace it by searching for mail from the student in question. Since Email can be accessed from anywhere in the world, it also provides literally global accessibility—an assignment submitted via Email in Connecticut is available to you almost instantly in New York, London, or Delhi.

Again, a primary concern in having students submit work electronically is making sure they know how to use the technology. Another issue related to electronic submission of work has to do with personal preferences of the grader. While it is true that electronic submission provides greater access, accountability, and potentially valuable feedback tools, these advantages must be weighed against the need to be online to access the submissions (at least long enough to download them onto your computer) and the need to open and close each file/assignment to grade it (or at least to print it out for grading) instead of just picking up the next paper on the pile. Depending on the assignment and the preferences of the grader, the latter may limit the attractiveness of electronic submission for a given assignment or the course as a whole.

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