

STRATEGIES FOR LIVING WITH INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Feeling our way through the early part of the 21st Century may seem like a difficult task for faculty making use of technology to enhance instruction in the classroom, but there are some simple rules to remember that can keep you out of hot water. That reindeer-in-the-headlights look that happens when our stuff goes wrong and all those brilliant minds stare at your lameness can be avoided with some preparation and adherence to lessons learned from some of us who have been there many times.

Technology is not just about equipment...it's about people. Too often, in planning for educational technology, we become enamored with long lists of things we would like to have...the latest hand held gimmick, a new personal digital assistant, the coolest presentation systems, the fanciest bells and whistles that your money can buy. This thinking ignores the most important aspect of educational technology in the 21st Century - the people who use it. In order to be effective, Technology must be seen as a tool to communicate knowledge, not an end in itself. It is the vehicle with which to communicate the message, not the message itself. The good news is, in the 21st Century, teaching and learning with Technology just got easier!

Our students are Natives of the Information Age, which is to say they have grown up with the Technology of the age and are very comfortable with it. It is a natural part of their lives, whereas parents and teachers must in some cases learn the language of technology, almost as a second language. For the first time in the history of civilization, the Younger Generation can teach skills to their Elders! It is not unusual to find School systems and Districts

across the country actually enlisting the aid of students to help teachers understand the technology available to them. This has a significant impact upon the way we learn and the way we teach.

One increasingly important aspect of 21st Century teaching and learning is how we address various learning styles. As we know from research, the Brain *learns* in multiple ways (that is, is responsive to different stimuli), so why would it not make sense to *use* multiple methods to *teach*? By doing so, we more accurately address the various Learning Styles individuals develop over time. The use of multi-media in education appeals to all the senses and enables educators to reach more people in an effective manner. It has been shown that such methods enhance knowledge transfer and retention, and it is easy for students to adapt to technology as a teaching tool. The Value-added of this approach is that no one gets left out!

Stephen Covey has stated that we only retain 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see , 50% of what

we both hear and see, 70% of what we discuss with others, 80% of what we experience personally, and *95% of what we teach!* (Stephen Covey, *Franklin-Covey*) Research in many areas supports this, so, as you can see, the more stimuli involved in learning, the better the retention. The old lecture method of education that has been around since the Middle Ages allows us to retain about 20% of what is heard.

With all the new knowledge about how technology impacts the educational process, what sometimes is overlooked is the fact that there are some simple rules about using technology in the classroom that we hate to be reminded about; however, to ignore these time-tested principles is to set ourselves up for ultimate failure when it comes time for the technology to work for us. These strategies for living with instructional technology are:

RULE # 1: Practice, practice, practice!

The best way to get to Carnegie Hall is still constant rehearsal, and it is especially important when planning to use technology.

Remember, if anything can go wrong, it will, but you can lessen the likelihood of an embarrassing moment and lost class time by rehearsing with the equipment you plan to use well in advance. Try to get as close to actual conditions as possible (same classroom, same equipment, same software) to keep from being surprised with a presentation that worked on your computer at home, but failed on the classroom computer or laptop. There is an issue of compatibility when changing platforms, because Office 97 tools don't exactly work like Office 2000 or XP, for example. It is also important to practice good habits instead of repeating bad ones. If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got. Check and re-check, and don't ASSUME!

Rule # 2: Technology without training is like a new car without keys.

That new computer or SmartBoard in your classroom may look beautiful, but can you drive it without the keys? Take the time to get some training from campus Instructional Technology staff, New

Horizons, or other experts in hardware and software usage. It pays off in many ways and answers many of those questions you struggle with when considering classroom technology. You have a technology training program with peers or experts available to help you learn the tools of the 21st Century, so look them up and learn all you can from them. Finally, get to know the IT Department people positively. They can be a valuable source of one-on-one training sooner or later!

Rule #3: It's the Curriculum!

Regardless of how fancy your technology becomes or how lucid you get with it, content is still the key. No matter how many technological bells and whistles you can produce, if the content is not there, your students won't be, either. Technology is an enhancement, not an end in itself, and no one knows this better than the young students in your classroom. So, if your content is on solid ground, asynchronous learning, collaboration, and virtual simulations will all fall into place easily. This is true whether you are a boring lecturer or a classroom entertainer. Outcomes are a product of

input, so if you don't update the content, you will always get what you always got.

Rule #4: It's not about you; it's about THEM!

Our students for the most part are the Natives of the Information Age. They understand technology as naturally as we understood the Industrial Age, because they grew up using the machines of their Age (computers). Their "computer language" is native, not a second language. Music is another way to look at this "other Digital Divide." Kenny G has no meaning to their generation; it's Radiohead, Creed, and Incubus.

They have no sympathy for your struggles with technology, although they are often very willing to be helpful without passing judgement. The point is: it's OK to leverage their superior experience with these new machines to enhance your teaching, because THEY are the ones benefiting from your profession. It really doesn't matter to them that you get embarrassed if you fail with technology, but it does matter if you don't ask for help. After all,

education is about what you can do for them AND what they can do for you. Collaboration is a concept they are comfortable with.

Rule #5: If it ain't broke, it will be!

Two things we all despise are flat tires and computers that do not work, but we keep experiencing these gentle reminders that machines are not infallible. Count on technology to fail. As remarkable and increasingly reliable that it has become, the equipment will not last forever. Expect bulbs to go out, computers to freeze, screens to get stuck, printers to refuse your order to print, and frustrations to mount. Recognizing the inevitability of breakdowns actually helps you to avoid embarrassment when it finally happens. If you "stay on top" of your equipment, you may learn to be able to anticipate problems, thereby proactively fixing them before it is too late. Just as you check tires for air pressure occasionally to avoid getting stranded on the highway, do the same with your instructional technology tools to avoid getting stranded in front of eager learners. Preventive maintenance extends the life of the equipment, too, so read the manual that accompanies your

equipment, or get some advice from the IT department that is responsible for servicing the items.

Following these simple strategies will help you to leverage more out of technology in the classroom and enable learning at a higher level. For more information, contact the author at Georgia Perimeter College, Atlanta, GA, 770-551-3054.