A Pendulum Swings:
Moving From a Low Media Approach to a Technological Classroom

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Abstract

One simply has to spend five minutes with any 8th grader to understand just how prevalent technology is in the life of today’s teenagers. Not only will you see the latest smart phone attached to their hands, but if you remain in ear shot of a typical teenaged conversation, you are bound to hear ongoing references to social media, you-tube videos, and the latest text messages and instagrams. Over the past few years, it has become evident that the original mission statement of our creative arts magnet program, which included “low media” influence, was no longer a realistic or even a beneficial goal. Media and the culture of social technology has become extremely influential to today’s youth and society in general. More and more, I realized that I needed to get on board the technology train, or miss out on the many opportunities to connect in a meaningful way with and among my students.

This paper will look through a cultural lens at the rationale behind using meaningful technology in the classroom, and most specifically, I will be sharing how I developed a new classroom blog that is both informative and interactive with students and parents. **By creating an interactive classroom blog, and exploring new ways to integrate links to technology, I hope to encourage a participatory culture and to develop closer relationships through an exchange of ideas with and among my students and their parents.**

Keywords: participatory culture, relational technology, informational technology

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Over the course of this semester, I have been examining and reflecting on technology as it relates to both my students and myself.  One thing that I am clear about is that my students and the youth today feel very comfortable with the multiple modes technology; much more so than I do.  When our creative arts program first began fourteen years ago, one of our family commitments was “low media” exposure.  In our current day and age, that is clearly not possible or even reasonable.  Our society is immersed in instant communication and social interactions through technology and media; it has replaced many of the former modes of communication that many of us have grown up with.

 Today, our school community and parent body expects that we address this growing technological demand; students must know how to maneuver in our technological world.  Likewise, parents are even more interested in keeping up with the progress of their students, whether it be grades, projects, or behavior. More and more, parents and students are relying on that communication coming from webpages that can easily be accessed from home. Witnessing this trend over the last several years, and experiencing it first hand with my own teenager, I have realized that I had a responsibility to both research and hopefully understand how technology is operating in our culture, and specifically the culture of our youth. Of course, in order to do that I had to examine my own my ideology regarding technology and commit to introducing only that technology which was useful and applicable to my curriculum and students. As Jessica Parker explains, “When educators discuss and analyze emergent modes of communication, learning and play, we are forced to rethink long-standing practices and relations within schools” (Parker, p. 2). As an educator, I had to examine how I and my school were rethinking and addressing the new literacy that is emerging both outside and within our school walls.

As somewhat of a “newbie” to technology, I found myself initially looking at technology through an informational lens, viewing “them as fixed objects with a use and purpose. One decides whether to adopt them by considering their use and purpose, considering their cost, and weighing costs and benefits” (Burbles & Callister, p. 5). I have found out first-hand the flaw within this view. Yes, my intention was to have a useful and meaningful tool, but I did not fully recognize the impact of “changing practices and social processes” (Burbles & Callister, p. 7). I found that the more I incorporated technology within my classroom, the more I found myself reconfiguring lessons and weighing the costs and benefits of the new approach; were students really benefitting from the tool in a meaningful and collaborative way? As Burbles and Callister expressed, the common label of “informational technologies” (IT) seems to imply that information is absolute or factual in nature; however, information always flows through the human process (“cooked” as they put it) of filtering and interpretation, which cannot be separated from an individual’s experiences (Burbles and Callister, p. 3).

Creating meaning within the curriculum is one of my prime objectives as a teacher. Many questions began to arise: was I creating a more meaningful pathway through technology or was I simply bringing in a novelty tool? Were they encouraged to share their ideas, or were they isolated from interacting with each other? “The computer does not operate in a vacuum. Injecting digital technologies into the classroom necessarily affects our relationship with every other communications technology, changing how we feel about what can or should be done with pencils and paper, chalk and blackboard, books, films, and recordings” (Jenkins, p. 8). These ideas slowly developed through the readings and conversations with my peers and colleagues both in the Master’s program and among my school community.

# Participatory Culture of a Classroom Blog

One of the commitments that I made to myself at the beginning of the year was to try and open a line of communication with my students via a new classroom blog.  I had used a basic webpage for several years, but found it to be difficult to update and upload various pictures, videos, on-line links, and attachments. There was also very little opportunity to have an on-going dialogue.  So, I abandoned my old webpage and embarked on a new blog experience.  It has truly been an exciting endeavor.  Over the course of the last two months, I have found my blog evolving based on my students’ interests and needs; it has allowed me to relate to them on a different level. Instinctively, my goal was to create a tool promoting a participatory culture and relational technology, many ideas which I found readily addressed in Jenkin’s article. Mainly I wanted a site with, low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others, mentorship between students where expertise is shared, contributions matter, and members have a social connection and are valued in the community (Jenkins, p.7). After reading Jenkins’s article, I found myself feeling pretty on target with my blog mission.

My blog, which you can find at ksporrer.edublogs.com, has evolved over these last two months, but there are a few main features that promote communication and accountability with my students and parents. The first is our homework page. Every afternoon, at closing time, I project my blog page and enter homework from my students various classes as they are entering them into their own planners. I find that this is a way to foster time management and have a conversation about upcoming assignments. This is also a useful tool for parents to assist with that time management and keep track of their child’s daily work.

The second feature I highlight with my students are the individual category pages, where students can find information, pictures, videos, and other tools specifically related to the content area: language arts, social studies, algebra, physical science, etc. I encourage students to visit these pages so they can see their own work and the work of their peers. Students can make comments on these pages and other students’ work, which are filtered through my e-mail for approval. I also encourage students to share this work with their parents, which encourages dialogue on the home front.

A third main feature is my links section. Here students can find valuable links to their text books in various subjects, homework tutorial sites that are subject specific, a link to jupitergrades.com where they can access their current grades, and many activity sites that we are using in class. As the year has progressed, I have added many activity sites for the students to use both in class and at home; several of these sites have been generated from our classroom discussions and presentations. Through this medium, students take the center stage in the learning process and they are encouraged to share both their knowledge and explore how these tools can be utilized in other parts of their world.

**Reader’s Response Page.**

One of my favorite and most successful features on my blog would have to be my reader’s response page.  I was inspired to add this page as a replacement to the standard reading log after reading Donalyn Miller’s *The Book Whisperer*. I combined the idea of encouraging dialogue between students with the idea of a community page where students could share what they were reading and having them comment on what other students were reading. This activity has taken the place of the once mundane task of a written log where I was the only one reviewing and commenting on a student’s progress. My students were immediately excited at this new assignment; it became a way for them to earn points while engaging in one their favorite past times, chatting with friends. Since the inception of my “Reader’s Response Page” I have had 231 student entries. What is even more exciting is that I now have students from other classrooms joining in on the conversations. Through this participatory culture, “The community itself provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation” (Jenkins, p. 7).

Hey Felix, I came across your comment as I was shamelessly stalking your class’s website purely for good book recommendations. I am a great fan of Stephen King’s books, and I thought, if you were interested in reading more of his collection you should read his book “Misery”. This remains to be one of my favorite King books, and delves more into the psychological-horror genre. It is about a writer who gets into a car crash while driving in the snow, and is saved by his biggest fan, Annie Wilkes, who at first, takes care of him, but ends up forcing him to write more books for him–in quite a diabolical way. THIS is a GOOD x 100000 book and I would absolutely recommend it to you if you’re into the horror genre. Now I’ll get back to being really creepy and look at what you people are reading. BYE (Makena, 2014)

Through this experience, students feel free to share their opinions, likes, and dislikes on certain books, authors, and genres.  Rather than just me reviewing the material, there is a rich conversation happening within our classroom community and beyond. This section of my blog has created an informal environment in a formal setting, one that is “less structured than school-based settings, a culture of shared participation helps to nurture a sense of membership and identity” (Parker, p. 8). I am really enjoying conversing with my students in a different capacity as well.  Another rewarding result has been that many reluctant readers are inspired to pick up a book and check it out because the recommendation and input came from one of their peers. This is direct evidence of Burbles and Callister’s claim that computer technology is no longer reduced to information only, but also as a communication and socializing medium – a “public space” of exchange and debate. Although not a substitution for face-to-face interactions, it is one in which global conversations can exist; rather than just a delivery system, it becomes a collaborative space for teaching and learning (Burbles and Callister, p. 4).

## Cross Curriculum Connections.

I must preface this section of my paper with a big thank you to my fellow EDCT 552 constituents. You have equipped me with many tools to enhance my multiple subject curriculum. As a middle school teacher who covers language arts, social studies, physical science, and algebra, I am always looking for ways to link the curriculum whenever possible. One such opportunity presented itself when my EDCT 552 peers introduced popplet.com. I immediately added this site to my blog links, and using our new ASUS laptops, we embarked on group presentations, linking together language arts and social studies. The students were placed into groups (using another technological tool, the random student app) and were set to the task of taking on one event leading up to the Revolutionary War to present to the class. This was the first time the students had access to our new mobile laptop cart, and they were up for the challenge. What I enjoyed most about this experience was that the students were able to work at the same time on the same popplet creating a real sense of group accountability. The students then shared their presentations with the rest of the class who developed their chapter notes based on the individual chapter popplets.

What I appreciated most about this project was the collaboration of students who are performing at different skill levels. Once again, I saw a component of relational technology where students felt valued because of their input, and grew from the feedback and subsequent discussion between them and their peers. As Ken Robinson says, "Education is shifting beneath our feet."  Intelligence is both dynamic and interactive, and it is being fostered even more so by the exponential growth in technology.  Jessica Parker’s voice thread mirrored this thought when she discussed the Read and Write Web, noting that the web pages "shift from static to dynamic with the ability to both add and share." During this activity, I saw student who rarely spoke to each other on a regular basis, sharing thoughts and ideas to bring the best of themselves into one product. These projects were then shared with the broader school and family community through our classroom social studies page, giving the students an opportunity to carry on the conversation outside of school.

The most recent technological endeavor once again combined language arts and social studies. As we embarked on deconstructing the Declaration of Independence, we used Storyboardthat.com to bring clarity and understanding to a very complex document. Furthermore, our students were tasked with transforming that document to simpler terms that they would present to our 6th grade classes. The students combined the technique of word replacement with the cartooning process of Storyboardthat.com to create visually engaging cartoons with a simplified translation of the document. These projects will be linked to my classroom blog for students and parents to enjoy and respond to.

**Final Thoughts**

 We as teachers need to resist the tendency to remain in the "status quo" state of mind, and be willing to step out of our comfort zone.  Like our students, we need to find that inner-child who once embraced innovation and experimentation, even if it means experiencing failures in the process.  As Jessica Parker mentions, kids play and don't give up; they are willing to fail over and over again when it comes to the informal world of technology, and they don't feel badly about trying and failing.  Shouldn't they come into the classroom with that same passion for trying and failing to reach the end goal - learning something new? Jenkins reiterates that, in this way, students are willing to spend energy to try and find out what it is that they need to know. "Currently, young people are playing with these skills as they engage with games or social activities that reward the ability to maintain a mental picture of complex sets of relationships and to adjust quickly to shifts in perceptual cues (Jenkins, p. 35).  As Robinson also mentions, "we don't grow into creativity, we grow out of it."  Our students should motivate us to take chances.  Adults operate in a world-wide society that squelches that creativity as we get older through judgment and the fear of criticism.  Once we recognize that we can have the freedom to experiment with new and innovative technologies, we can see the potential of a whole new set of possibilities in communicating with our students.

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