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Guest Editorial: Kicking Technology out of the Classroom

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Kicking Technology out of the Classroom

by Linda Gray

As an incessant learner, I enjoy digging into a good book, being enlightened by a stimulating discussion, and picking up a new skill. In a never-ending quest to engage my technologically savvy students, I enjoy wading around in new computer programs to figure out how I might incorporate more technology into my courses to aid learning. That doesn't mean trying to force podcasts and RSS feeds into every subject I teach, but it does mean I try to make the most of appropriate technology to present information visually and to encourage interaction and student feedback. I now, however, am rethinking how I've been using technology in my courses.

Over the last couple of decades, numerous articles and education conferences have promoted incorporating technology into our courses—most ubiquitous, perhaps, has been PowerPoint. Colleges and universities have installed classroom computers and projectors, loaded on programs for teaching, and adopted classroom management systems, such as Blackboard and Desire2Learn, thus enabling faculty members to make classroom presentations, upload course handouts, and post links to useful Internet resources. More recently, some faculty members have been creating and posting podcasts, and some universities even encourage their faculty members to post their entire lectures, accessible for free on the Internet. For those of us teachers who have sought to be riding this wave of technology in the classroom, using technology in our courses seemed to be the best way of engaging the minds of our millennial students.

To suggest actually removing technology from classrooms would seem absurd in light of recent pedagogical trends, but kicking technology out of the classroom is what Southern Methodist University professor Jose Bowen (2006) suggests. That's not to say he disapproves of using technology as a teaching tool—far from it. Instead, he says it belongs *outside* the classroom so that active teacher-student interaction can challenge minds *inside* the classroom. PowerPoint slides, he maintains, are not effective within the walls of a classroom because they are really much like lecture notes and confine the teacher to stick to a script in order to present content; however, “student epiphany...usually occurs when we abandon the script and follow our instincts” (p. 2). Bowen proposes using technology to cover content outside of class so that the teacher can “use class time to demonstrate the continued value of direct student to faculty interaction and discussion” (p. 1). Bowen is quick to add that a few student questions at the end of a lengthy lecture are not equivalent to an engaging class discussion.

Teaching in recent years has so encouraged instructors to incorporate technology into the classroom that reversing the trend would force educators to reconsider their classroom activities. Bowen believes that lecturing during class signals students that they are expected to memorize facts—and regurgitate them—yet facts can be disseminated outside of class. Expecting students to discuss and question information and differing viewpoints requires the teacher to create an environment that encourages these classroom activities, and lecturing (using either notes or overhead slides) from behind a lectern is counterproductive. His recommendation “to open up class time for those best ‘aha’ moments is to remove your recitation of content the lecture) from the class room” (2006, p. 4).

In questioning whether or not students prefer instructors using presentation software (e.g., overhead transparencies, PowerPoint) or whether or not students experience higher scores if presentation software is employed, Erin Hardin (2007) set up and studied eight sections of introductory psychology courses. After ensuring pre-test conditions were the same, the

researcher had each of the four instructors teach one section without PowerPoint and one with PowerPoint. At the end of the semester, results indicated no difference between sections with or without PowerPoint. Students did not learn more, nor did they indicate they enjoyed the sections that used classroom technology any more than the sections without. From the instructors' points of view, the researchers found mixed reactions to using technology in the classes and to perceptions of whether or not the technology helped students.

A similar research objective was at the heart of a study of students in introductory statistics courses (Meletiou-Mavrotheris, M. Lee, C. & Fouladi, R.T., 2007). Students did enjoy the inclusion of technology, and they reported being more motivated to study; however, the use of technology did not improve the students' understanding of statistics or "key concepts related to inferential statistics" (p. 11). Of particular note is the surprising and disappointing observation that even though students in the technology-enhanced section of this study worked on specific tasks to help them understand sampling distribution, in the end, their understanding of sampling distribution was no better than the control group's.

An EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) study (2004) used questionnaires to discover students' reactions to the use of technology in the classroom. Generally, results were mixed; for example, 30.8 % preferred courses using extensive technology and 25.6 % preferred to take course with "limited or no use of technology in the classroom" (p. 48). ECAR analyzed the data to determine specific factors influencing student responses. Results indicated that a student's choice of major affected attitudes toward technology in the classroom; however, how competent instructors are with the technology was significant to students as they clearly developed negative responses to technology in the course if the teacher fumbled with operating the equipment and thus lost class time. While students appreciated the technology because it was visual and helped to organize information, they did complain about faculty who simply read their PowerPoint slides to the students. The students also observed that they tended to be more passive when PowerPoint types of technology were used and that the class seemed overly structured.

In summarizing Bowen's points (2006) and citing other research on students' often negative views of classroom technology, Jeffrey Young observes, "technology has hardly revolutionized the classroom experience for most college students, despite millions of dollars in investment and early predictions that going digital would force professors to rethink their lectures and would herald a pedagogical renaissance" (2009, para. 5). Perhaps another "pedagogical renaissance" would be in order—one that convinces us to re-examine our uses of technology so that we use it innovatively and not poorly. Simply thrusting technology into our courses is not effective; all we end up doing is teaching the same old ways (e.g., lecturing) but "plugged in."

Bowen (2006) does suggest several good pedagogical uses of technology, but they are designed to be used outside of class so that teachers are freed up to engage students in lively discussions during class. He recommends using email for announcements, such as rescheduling an assignment, so precious class time is not wasted, and one email can reach all students with one simply click on "send." Facebook easily works for creating a group for each course, and because so many students are already on Facebook, it's convenient for them. Bowen acknowledges that course management systems can do the same thing, but he likens them to "asking [students] to come to office hours in your building. Posting on Facebook is more like showing up in the dorms for dinner" (p. 2). Using online tests frees up class time too, and having students read their assignments, look at PowerPoints posted online, and then taking quizzes over the content *before* they come to class means that more students will be prepared for class discussion.

Stepping back and examining how best to use technology is good advice we should take. Instead of automatically plugging technology into older pedagogical methods (e.g., lectures), teachers should think creatively about the opportunities that emerging technologies can provide. That means that the technology doesn't have to be *inside* the classroom if it can be used more creatively and effectively *outside* the classroom. Instead of viewing technology as the "frosting" on the pedagogical cake—that is, using technology as a little extra pizzazz to make a lesson more exciting—teachers should look at technology as a tool to help students learn when they're not in with the teachers in the class.

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