

Technology in the classroom: Bells and Whistles of Technoism or Technological Tools to Facilitate Learning?

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Recently an instructor shared the fact that when offering a class online for the first time, she missed experiencing “the multiplicity of physical clues and the communicability of the mood.” That is, she missed the interpersonal piece that lets her know the current mindset of the students. Instructors are continually pushed and prodded to put classes online. Web education is the wave of the future. The prediction is, better get on board or be left behind. This type of admonishment or the subtle clues that educators routinely experience are a product of “Technoism.” “Technoism” is a word to describe the shame, guilt and condemnation one feels when asked if the switch to multimedia or web based education is justifiable. In other words does the professor dare ask for verification of the perceived or the educational benefits of online courses? One of the most contentious issues is the amount of, or lack of, interaction experienced with online offerings. One student conveyed that it is impossible to experience cultural diversity in a web-based format. It was through open discussions in a live gender and diversity class that the first-hand experience of working with different types of people came to life. Would this reflective moment in have occurred if the course had been offered online? Will instructors continue to accept this loss of interpersonal interaction in lieu of the bottom line profits associated with web-based learning driven by “Technoism”?

The effectiveness of online courses is still hotly debated although most technology advocates would have you believe that it is the only way to go in the future. Do students really gain the knowledge and skills necessary via a computer interface? A recent advertisement offered an online course in public speaking. It is difficult to visualize how a student could develop public speaking skills online. Many have suggested that educational institutions will experience financial windfalls from Internet courses, but what are the long-term implications for the students? At the risk of sounding like Luddites we would like to consider a few issues when it comes to the marriage of education and technology. Technology certainly should be part of academe and a useful pedagogical tool. Here are some insights on how educators can effectively use technology in the learning process:

1. Don't sacrifice substance for style. The most controversial topic in relation to online courses is the quality of the material of the specific offering. Does style over shadow substance? Although designing online courses may keep an instructor in the technological loop and may demonstrate graphical skills, is substance lost when the bells and whistles are the main focus of the course? Online courses can be designed effectively if the designer is aware of this issue and does not lose focus of course objectives. Learning objectives must take precedence over style. Studies have shown that at the university level, many students feel that the use of modern technology only provides an attractive presentation format but does little to enhance the learning.
2. Another strong argument against online courses is the lack of interaction and contact. As earlier mentioned, the classroom experience will not be duplicated online. There is something isolating and limiting with electronic communication. If an educator chooses online course design, a good rule of thumb is to offer virtual office hours and possibly student-to-student project work so the students can experience a holistic educational experience.
3. Find a technique to offer up to the minute feedback on homework and projects. Research consistently shows that a learner-centered environment consists of personal feedback. Feedback that is personal demonstrates interest in the student's learning, and developmentally this motivates the student.
4. Don't sacrifice your teaching philosophy because of “Technoism.” If you must participate in distance education, evaluate your teaching philosophy and determine how technology fits your personal teaching objectives. If students derive energy and enthusiasm from your personal contacts, distance education may not be for you. Technology might be the wave of the future but possibly only the future of those who want to embrace it. Your teaching has

been honed over years of experience. If there are high tech tools out there that will improve your students learning, use them. If “Technoism” is pushing you just for the sake of new technology, make sure what you currently do is broken before you reinvent it.

5. Lastly, do not use technology for the sake of technology without evaluating its educational usefulness. Will the technology enhance the learning experience? Will it facilitate learning of course objectives? Will it provide reasonable return on investment; will this investment better prepare students for the future? A recent study of K-12 educators found a common complaint centering on the fact that school systems purchased the latest technology due to “Technoism” and not because it enhanced learning. Sometimes new makes students nervous and anxious and puts undue pressure on them to learn the technology, thus taking away from the time spent learning course materials.

“Technoism” may be the driving force behind the inundation of technology in education. If faculty don’t stand firm against the encroachment of web based learning and the so-called Internet University, a few multimedia superstars will build and market electronic courseware that is one size and fits all. It will be similar to having the same Wal-Mart in every town. This will threaten the community of scholars, eliminate diverging views and could ultimately put education in the hands of a few. Sound ludicrous; look at the number of mergers and acquisitions in the business world. Education is following in these same footsteps.

It is time to step back and evaluate technology in our institutions. Faculty must openly discuss distance education and make educated choices without fear of reprisal or condemnation.

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