

Let's Not Get "Technical"

Roland Pelletier, Teacher, North Okanagan Junior Academy, Armstrong, BC

It is July, and you might not read this until, well sometime, but I would like to share with you the importance of employing a practical level of technology in the learning process as it is both beneficial and rewarding for the learner and the instructor. To help illustrate this, I will draw from both my own experiences, and that of others who have impacted my thinking. As it is based on personal experience it will be written in the first person narrative. The following is not based on research, studies, or other scholarly work. It is beyond the scope of this paper to advocate the employment of any one type of technology, or how to practically implement technologies into the classroom. I would like to look at the human side of providing learning tools, or rather why those tools are not provided.

For the most part, educators are accommodating of technologies in the classroom, but frequently they demonstrate a level of inhabitation towards employing these learning tools for the sole use of individual learners. This may be for a variety of reasons, but for argument sake it likely stems primarily from four reasons: lack of empathy, apathy, arrogance, and or covetousness.

I am a teacher and I accept ignorance as it can be countered with education, but to take corrective measures so that a learner can further achieve takes a level of empathy and reasoning. To illustrate this here is a story: It's 5:20 AM on a cold February morning. Flight 917 is delayed. Inside the small airport terminal is a newly hired ticket agent. The nineteen year-old is struggling to calculate and plot the twenty values, ranging from three to six digits, that make up the aircraft's weight and balance sheet. The pilot, before take off, requires this sheet. Outside, on the apron, waits a \$15 million aircraft, anxious passengers, and crew that is looking at spending their whole day playing catch up. Variations of this scene are played out for two weeks; until the agent is provided with an inexpensive calculator by an empathetic flight attend. The problem of carrying out mathematical operations is solved there by allowing the agent to focus on other equally important tasks. I would like to share another story that someone once told me on this theme. It goes like this. Two friends carry a patient into a doctor's office; the doctor looks at the patient and confirms what is obvious; two broken legs and turns to walk away without any treatment. The two friends look at each other, and one calls out to the doctor, "Well aren't you going to cast the legs or something?" Looking thoughtful, the doctor turns and looks again at the patient, then looks at the patients in the waiting area. The doctor then says, "It would not be fair to place your friend's legs in casts and not do the same for all these others too." As strange as the story is, the point is simply, not everyone requires the same treatment. The level of empathy often determines the level of care and attention, and this is where the vast majority of teachers shine.

Apathy is a little more of a challenge as it tends to be pervasive in the human race. In some situations apathy is overcome by education. More frequently however, it requires external motivation, which by its very nature is short lived and not apt to generate a life changing shift in thinking. I am just being honest.

So this leaves arrogance and covetousness. In addressing arrogance, it might be helpful to look outside of the teaching profession for a moment to an extreme example before we bring it back home. There are times when accepted practice are employed with out question, even while common sense would dictate that the practice is impractical or based on outdated thinking. For example, let's look at the experience of medical interns. Common sense and scientific studies show that sleep deprivation leads to errors in judgment, slow response time, and impaired reasoning; yet as a part of their training men and women are subject to this practice just as their patience are most dependent on the student's keenness of mind and ability to recall her or his learning. "Why?" I have asked doctor friends. The most consistent response is, you guessed it, because that is what the doctors before them had to do. Now that is arrogance. If I **HAD TO** then you **SHOULD HAVE TO ALSO**. What is the comparison between the profession of medical practitioner and teacher, just this, we often reflect what has been modeled without consciously reasoning the whys and what fors. You might want to grab yourself a pair of steel-toed boots before you read any further, just to warn you. Is it important that each student learns to read? Is it important that each student learns mathematical operations, addition facts, multiplication facts to 12, or primary numbers to 13? My answer is yes. But when? If this learning is within the artificially imposed time lines of grade and sequence then great, but for many learners this may happen long after they have left the classroom. Think about this, not every night school student "got it" in time, or in the sequence it was taught (life is a much better teacher than you or I). Provide the learner with the appropriate tool to compensate for what they have not yet learned and watch as they first compensate, and then determine to master what challenges his or her progress. Ideal? Maybe in some cases, but I dare you to try it. Albert Einstein is purported to have said, "Whatever challenges one might have in mathematics, mine is greater." Yet history records that by employing the appropriate tools this man was able to expand greatly the human experience.

Covetousness? Hey, I am only a teacher! My advice is get over it. Someone will always have a bigger, smaller, better, faster, or nicer one than you have right now, that's marketing. You have heard it as often as I have: "Its not fair." As ridicules as it sounds, I recall being present as a teacher shared with a colleague why she/he would not permit a student to use a computer to complete written work. The jest of the reasoning given was that the computer that the student would be using was bigger, smaller, better, faster and nicer than the one that the school provided to the teacher, and she/he couldn't provide a computer to all the students in the class. If a learner is good with numbers, then being forced to use a calculator is a useless burden, but don't begrudge the learner any tools that he or she might need to succeed.

Life and learning are an ongoing process. As teachers, I believe that we are most effective when we help facilitate life long learning. Removing the insignificant obstacles to master the important tasks should be the aim. That is the way I see it anyways.