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FEAR AND TEACHING: A DEADLY COMBINATION

It's About More Than The Familiar

As a teacher, I wonder with so many pieces of technology available, what should my approach be? I know some teachers are afraid of these emerging tools. But I also wonder if that fear is a barrier to student learning. As I research the landscape of tools that teachers, school districts, and higher education institutions fear the most, mobile phones may be at the top of the list. But should we as educators fear them?

Mobile Phone Breakdown

Mobile devices are growing at an astronomical pace. Statistics today show that there are about 7 billion people in the world today. Roughly 1.6 billion people are connected to the Internet via a computer (World Internet Statistics, 2009). But about 4.3 billion people have mobile phones. More than two-times the population has a mobile phone over a computer connected to the Internet (Murph, 2009). These are staggering numbers considering opportunities in education.

Corporations have caught on to this trend and are capitalizing. By providing mobile resources for their employees to access from laptops on the road or their mobile devices. With the advent of the iPhone, many companies are rushing to create applications that allow their employees to access information from the company (Choice Hotels, 2009).

Higher education is trying to keep up. Duke University and Abeline Christian University are two top schools with mobile Web sites as well as iPhone applications and infrastructure delivery mechanisms, which connect their students to learning. Recently Blackboard, Inc., the largest provider of online course development and management,

released a widget to Facebook and an application for the iPhone. This is evidence that Blackboard is trying to bridge the gap to students where they are and not force students to come to them.

The Reality of The Numbers

In K-12, however, on average, there is a large gap in the amount of computers per student in most classrooms. Most K-12 districts do not have use for any learning management system (LMS) to connect students outside the classroom. Technology is being encouraged, but not necessarily being resourced. With the larger gap in the computer to student ratio, there is a smaller gap for students who have mobile phones.

Students are learning using multiple platforms. They use their phones now more for text and productivity than they do for actual phone calling. A mobile phone has become tool. Education is catching up to this idea. Most school districts as well as higher education institutions have what is commonly called an "Acceptable Use Policy" for technology. This is a contract for students and faculty to abide by to keep technology use fair and safe. The majority of school districts have a ban on mobile phones because of the potential distraction they present. Some more progressive districts are moving toward a "Responsible Use Policy", where teachers use tools students use and teach them how to use them responsibly. What this means is teachers will need to adopt new teaching strategies which leverage these newer technologies. Instead of wasting their energy "fighting their preferred delivery system", teachers should be "working to ensure that (our) students extract maximum understanding and benefit from the vast amounts of cell-phone-based learning of which they will, no doubt, soon take advantage" (Prensky, 2008).

The Transition from Fear to Transformational Learning

Teachers need to begin to understand how these tools work and how they can integrate them into their teaching. This pattern has always been in education. There was a

fear of the Internet in classrooms years ago because of the inappropriate content online. Now most every district and every higher education institution has a staff to manage IT and Internet traffic. In higher ed there is still a debate on the use of laptops in the classroom for fear that students will misuse the tools. They are too much of a distraction. Now they are an integral part of the learning process and a standard tool for students. Across the country the stance has been to ban the tool instead of teach appropriate use with the tool. Today, however, laptops are commonplace in higher ed and leaking down to K-12. Mobile devices are the next domino to fall.

Mobile learning or “M-Learning” is still in it’s infancy. There have been several studies that support the implementation of mobile learning in the classroom and how it increases student outcomes. In a study conducted by Dr. Cathleen Norris and Dr. Elliot Soloway, student outcomes increased by 13% over students who did not use a mobile device (Traylor, 2009). Learning is changing, and students need to be equipped. Dr. Norris explains:

“The way we learn and what we learn is changing, and that is really the majority of the issue around 21st Century Skills. Children need to learn how instead of what. How do I find this information? How do I determine from this Internet what is valid information? How does this fit into everything else that I’m reading? How does this merge with my textbook? It’s the how. Again, it’s helping the child take the wealth of information that’s out there, assimilate it, and determine what’s a valid source, what’s real information” (Traylor, 2009).

Many teachers look at the mobile phone the same way they look at the laptop, PA systems, or even telephones. They interrupt learning. Teachers need to be empowered to look beyond the immediate barrier to the educational opportunities they could have speaking the language of the digital natives. It definitely takes time and effort. But the payoff is when

students take a turn and begin learning. Mobile phones should be thought of just like other tools in the classroom like books, whiteboards, or even writing implements. They are tools to help accomplish a learning objective.

Closing Thoughts

As a new teacher and educational technologist, I see tools and teachers interface. Some well; Some not so well. But what I'm learning is that it's really about the student. It's about helping them get to the destination of what they need to learn by whatever means necessary. If it requires laptops, I feel like it's my job as a teacher to understand how to use and teach with the laptop. If it's a mobile phone, I feel like it's my job to understand how to use that tool and leverage it to teach to my students. Regardless of what the tool is, it's my responsibility as both a teacher and learner to interface with my students, as well as technologies, to bridge the gap and help them learn.

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