

REACHING AND TEACHING STUDENTS THROUGH THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

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I used to view technology as a hindrance, which subtracted time from classroom instruction by having to fulfill obligatory visits to the computer lab in order to put arbitrary checkmarks beside the technology outcomes for my grade. I was an occasional computer user but had not made any real connections between technology and teaching. That changed.

I heard that teachers experience challenging classes every few years, and I knew my turn was next. I was familiar with the group of students coming into my classroom and was aware of the challenges ahead. Although the class would not be overwhelming in size – only twenty students – the range in attitude and aptitude was enormous. Two students were known for behaviors that had continuously challenged teachers, and neither had followed the regular curriculum for the previous three years. Five students were described as disengaged and contributed only enough effort to receive a passing grade. Other students were on the verge of being placed, while three others were academically advanced.

I spent most of that summer preparing to teach this group of students. I knew the curriculum well but I wanted to be creative with my lessons and find imaginative ways to engage the students and have them take ownership over their learning. I wanted my classroom to be a community to which all students felt they belonged. I knew that if my students were to feel as though they were respected members of our community, I would need to value their input.

On the first day of classes I asked the students to prepare a presentation for the end of the week. I stated the purpose of the assignment – to introduce himself/herself – but made no stipulations of length, medium, or structure. When asked for more direction, I informed the students that *how* they chose to present would tell me as much about who he/she is as *what* they chose to present.

I knew this academic freedom was risky, but it was necessary. I needed to demonstrate that I respected and trusted my students, and that I considered them as equals in their learning process. I did not want to restrict their learning; I wanted to guide it.

I booked a multi-purpose room for our presentations and asked if there was anything specific students needed for their presentations. I did not mention their

presentations again. When Friday morning arrived I greeted the students as they entered the classroom. I took a deep breath. I began to worry that I had set my students up for failure by not providing a more rigid structure for them to follow and by not giving them class time to work on things. Before I could exhale, one of the students stood up and headed out the door toward the multi-purpose room.

I didn't know what to expect. This was one of the two students who had not participated in classroom activities for the past number of years. Although he had been in school, his attendance was limited and he had not completed enough work to be graded. As we entered the multi-purpose room he was turning on the smart board and inserting a jump drive. He was very technologically able and did not need assistance to navigate the school network to access his file. His project was fascinating, and technologically impressive. It was a computer-animated depiction of his family, friends, and things that were important to him. He did not make any eye contact during his presentation, nor did he look at anyone when he had finished. He quickly slouched into a chair at the back of the room and hid his face beneath the hood of his sweater.

Each and every student's presentation used some form of technology as the medium. The students had prepared blogs, web pages, movies, slideshows, online photo stories, and podcasts of interviews with family and friends. This was not a class full of challenging students; this was a class full of students waiting to be challenged. I had to change my perspective about how technology was a necessary part of instruction because their presentations illustrated how important it was in their lives outside of school; as a form of communication, entertainment, information, and expression. Pease-Alvarez and Samway (2008) state that teachers "should adjust curriculum and instruction to the needs and interests of their students" (p. 36), and that's exactly what I did.

We (my students and I) integrated technology into every lesson and activity imaginable. These lessons and activities included creating webquests, websites, read aloud stories, slideshows, videos, and presentations. Our learning transcended the classroom and extended into the computer lab, the multi-purpose room, the library, the community and the world via the Internet. We built relationships and connections, both inside and outside of our class, through the use of technology. Not only did each student earn a passing grade that year, but they reminded me of the importance of tapping into students' interests and experiences.

By incorporating technology into my classroom practices, I was not the conductor at the front of the classroom leading my students, but was learning alongside my students. They took ownership over their learning, and were motivated to journey and explore, to question and to learn. Technology allowed these students the opportunity to demonstrate skills and successes that had not been experienced in

the past. For these students, and for me, technology was the vehicle to teach and to learn. Technology provided me the opportunity to understand who my students were, and the venue to reach and teach them.

Note:

This article was written with the support of Marsha Costello. At the time of the events discussed in this article, Marsha was the school resource teacher and the technology facilitator. I incorporated technology into my lessons with her support and expertise.

Reference:

Pease-Alvarez, L., & Samway, K. D. (2008). Negotiating a top-down reading program mandate: The experiences of one school. *Language Arts, 86*, 32-41.

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