5 MYTHS ABOUT CLASSROOM TECHNOLOGY

How do we integrate digital tools to truly enhance learning?

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Technology: Necessary or Nice?

"What would happen if all of the computers in the world suddenly disappeared?" asked Sage French, a blogger and Microsoft intern (French, 2015).

I embedded Sage's screencast with her provocative question on my Kidblog site. Kidblog is a safe and student-friendly blogging platform that allows learners to write and share their thinking with a broader audience. Once my post was finished, I shared it with April Hafermann's 3rd grade classroom in our school, Howe Elementary. Her students were encouraged to respond to this inquiry in the comments section of the post. Here is what they shared:

- If all the computers suddenly disappeared, we wouldn't be able to do school work.
- We couldn't even post anything like this.
- You wouldn't get to do math on the tablets, computers, or phones.
- We wouldn't be able to play fun games on the computers.
- It would be like the 1980s! We would end up using chalkboards.
- It would be boring. Some people might be going crazy!

I always enjoy viewing school and learning through the eyes of our students. I agreed with what they shared. I wanted to add a few thoughts of my own, such as without computers we wouldn't have a school website to connect with families, we wouldn't have online resources for research, we would have only limited ways to show our learning and creative thinking, and we'd have fewer opportunities to develop connections with educators beyond our local colleagues (no social media). Without the connectivity that technology and the Internet provide, it would be a lonely planet indeed.

On the other hand, we often see technology through rose-tinted glasses. To play devil's advocate, what might be some of the benefits of a world without computers? First, no e-mail messages. I can almost hear the collective cheer from school administrators. Beyond small grievances, what might be different if computers were not in our lives? If I am not hunched over a computer screen during the day, that means more time in classrooms, more time with students, and more time to listen to teachers as they share their concerns and celebrations, face-to-face. That doesn't sound so bad.

I believe we struggle with technology in today's schools because *we aren't sure when it is necessary and when it is just nice.* Theories, practices, and applications abound as we try to make sense of what digital tools we should use with both students and staff. Studies to help determine the effectiveness of technology integration are now becoming available but it will be some time before there is consensus on when it is necessary to bring these powerful tools into teaching and learning practices.

So should we wait to integrate? Absolutely not. The opportunities for what is possible when teachers embed technology into instruction are almost endless. If you have ever hosted a Skype chat with an author and your class, observed a student's writing skills improve on his blog, or received a positive note from a mom saying how much she appreciates seeing her child's work in a digital portfolio, you understand the possibilities. The benefits outweigh any risks.

Our focus leads into a big question: How do we integrate digital tools to truly enhance learning? As an elementary school principal and a former teacher, I know this question weighs heavily on educators' minds. We feel external pressure to upgrade instruction, even when we feel what we already do has a positive effect student on learning. However, we are all pushed to do more, so let's explore the attributes of technology and how it can help improve teaching and learning.

As I highlight specific apps, devices, and strategies, I will share real life examples of how they are being used by educators in powerful ways. These educators worked through many hours of professional development, went through many trials and errors, and persevered in using technology to improve student learning. In working through that process alongside my colleagues, I've discovered three main criteria that support smart decisions about using technology in the classroom: access, purpose, and audience. I used those three criteria to create a list of questions and suggestions that are designed to help make smart decisions when considering technology integration within your school or classroom. The list was developed to be applicable to almost any context, but