

School is meant to be fun, right? I have always thought that, but it really wasn't until this summer that I experienced it myself from the other side of the desk. Participating in a course designed to explore the role of technology in the classroom created a learning environment that every teacher could envy. As an educator, I have spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to make my classroom a fun learning environment. Since attending the Summer 2007 Cohort in the MAET program, I have experienced the influence and impact that technology can have in a classroom full of learners.

After completing the Certificate Program in Educational Technology, I was convinced that proceeding toward my Master's Degree in that field was what I desired, but I still did not know what to expect from it. I had read course descriptions, looked at the objectives of the program, and tried to anticipate what taking a two-week, 9am to 4pm, face-to-face session, followed by online work would feel like. I felt that if there were a test of the program as a whole, the summer cohort would be it. The reality came quick when after the first day I said to some friends, "I really think this is going to be alright."

Now, as I reflect back after having completed the work asked of me, I see the progress that has been made. Discussions in class have broadened my view of the role of technology in education; projects, small and large, have proven to be an effective teaching tool on a variety of levels; individual work has led me to solidify my philosophy as an educator; in-class lessons have strengthened my understanding of the psychology of learning and memory. Truly this cohort had much to accomplish and the pressure of meeting content deadlines was great, but the pace and speed created little dead time and there was always something to which my attention needed to be directed. *It has been a*

positive influence on me as a teacher and as a learner and has provided me with the tools I need to make a large impact on my students and the educational community.

To begin, one of the more obvious ways that this cohort helped me was also a more indirect impact. As a psychology teacher, I have read, studied, and taught students the principles of learning and the concepts of memory. I have looked at the theories and applied them to examples in and out of the classroom setting to prove to students that learning is forever and nearly all behavior involves learning to various extents. Looking at the same theories with the twist of applying technology in education allowed me to see the same information in new ways. From behaviorism to motivation to situative cognition, I have not only received an application for the material in instructional strategy, but also in instructional material I can forward to psychology students.

I have struggled at times to make psychology meaningful to students. I can undoubtedly say that this cohort and the lessons therein will make me a better psychology instructor. With a deeper personal understanding of the different aspects of the behaviorist, cognitive, motivational, and social aspects of education I can apply this to my instructional practices directly as I make connections to not just the real world, but to a very personal world. As students, they are (most likely) aware that they are in school to learn, but may not fully perceive the scope and magnitude of learning. Just as learning about memory may help toward improving memory, learning about learning – something very real to them – may help toward creating a better, more intrinsically motivated student. I hope to successfully apply principles of learning in a new way to my psychology course to these ends.

The past few weeks has also offered an eye-opening experience for me as an educator and I think that it shed light on an issue that looked better when it was in the dark. One in-class group assignment was to create a video that portrayed an understanding of understanding. The structure behind it was to interview subjects to find out what they knew about a certain topic and analyze their responses to find themes and threads that signaled to the audience similar constructions of the topic. The viewer was to be able to learn that the subjects have created conceptualizations that helped them understand the topic, even though their constructs may have been false misconceptions.

Our topic revolved around the structure of the U.S. government and the results were disastrously perfect (for our purposes). We interviewed a sample of people that we felt reflected educated citizens, as well as a few younger adolescents without formal governmental education. What we found and tried to portray through the video was that individuals did not necessarily create misconceptions, rather they never fully conceptualized the structure in its most basic form, much less understand the inner workings of checks and balances.

The video presented two eerie realities that differ in relevance to the overall purpose of the project. First of all, there is a clear problem that exists across generations and educational settings. This problem seems to be a problem of practice and instruction that has created a fundamental void in the understanding of civic principles. Secondly, the result of the project revealed that even while citizens participate in government, they do not have a complete understanding of how our three branches combine to form one government – something that was “covered” somewhere in their education.

One of the readings we discussed was a piece written by Lee Shulman called "What is Learning and What Does It Look Like When It Doesn't Go Well." In this article, Shulman expressed the belief that people apply old understandings to new experiences and ideas. The author also suggests that there are three pathologies or conditions of misunderstanding: amnesia, fantasia, and inertia. He illustrates these as ways we can identify learning as not going well. Although we have no basis to determine whether or not our subjects once understood the topic on which we wanted them to reflect, we can see how Shulman's concept of fantasia applies here. Fantasia refers to an illusory understanding where the subject has a confidence about knowing, when the reality is that there is little or no understanding.

Even after reading the article and discussing it with other classmates, I never fully realized the scope of fantasia until after completing the video project. Shulman expresses that "fantasia can be dangerous." If one considers the prospect of generations of ignorant citizens whom should be active and educated participants in their government, the outcome is sickening. Upon considering the full scope of this problem, no person can argue against the importance of civic understanding in government.

Can technology provide a solution? Most certainly! Technology offers capabilities for willing educators to make government come alive. Real-world, real-time simulations, mock governmental functions (elections, law-making, court hearings) combined with digital presentations, and concept-mapping can offer a knockout combination for teaching students from middle school up the basics of government in a way that is bound to stick is a great start. Application of similar techniques later in high school will offer further

exercise of earlier understanding. Again, this is through a willing facilitator of learning. Although there is no easy solution to the problem of widespread fantasia, well-integrated, thoughtfully designed technology can provide relief.

Popular topics in education (outside of politics) seem to revolve around the notion that students are different than they were in the past. It may be a chicken/egg conundrum as to which came first, the change in instruction or the change in students, but the fact remains the same: education is a volatile and dynamic sphere where thousands of solutions lack the substance necessary to make the lasting impression people want them to. Why aren't students motivated to learn? One method might be to consider a cause of our current situation and assume solutions relating to that issue.

When I consider why my students are unmotivated to learn, I reflect upon my childhood for it is all I know. By comparison, I was raised in a slightly idealized setting: two married parents who were not overbearing, a stay-at-home mom, a working dad who loved reading and learning in free time, several brothers and sisters, and chores. As a young child I read books above my level that taught me everything from planets and the universe to King Tut and Mayan civilization. Even though it was a selection of convenience, I desired to learn because of a model created by my family setting. Then I realized that that could be a solution; why was my upbringing *idealized*? The problem is that we have more children in our classrooms that come from a broken home than from a two-parent, nuclear household.

The breakdown of the nuclear family has many impacts on the lives of our students today. A fifty-plus percent divorce rate has powerful emotional side effects that can leave

scars that last years. More devastating, I believe, are the social effects that leave students without positive educational models like I had growing up.

I do not have any studies to back up this argument, but I do have an anecdotal support. My wife teaches middle school math to eighth grade students. This fall she will have an exclusive eighth grade geometry course. The students share no commonalities except one: all come from a cohesive, nuclear family; all students have one biological mother and one biological father that live together at home. This is not an earth-shattering revelation worthy of a Nobel Prize, but it speaks somewhat of the social power of the nuclear family.

Vygotsky claimed that all learning is social; his sociocultural theory of learning states that children learn through interactions with other people. To me the theory assumes and implies that not only do children learn tasks, language, and to read this way, but also behaviors, habits, and how to learn. If I had a positive socializing agent such as a father to model a desire to learn, and my friend did not, could we predict who would be a better student? Not necessarily, but motivation to learn does not necessarily make a good student. As an educator, I would rather have a classroom of poor students with a desire and an intrinsic motivation for learning than a classroom of good students that cannot be motivated but through external rewards.

This is not to say that there are no solutions for the problem. We certainly cannot make divorce illegal or otherwise force two parents to stay together for the sake of their children (because that would be selfish and wrong). But as educators, we can understand motivation enough to know that students can be motivated when the learning applies to

them and when they themselves can make the material meaningful. Here is where technology can help.

Out-of-date lessons with overhead projectors and chalkboards are boring. In a day and age when the average TV screen image lasts a few seconds, educators need tangible material that they can engage in as they learn. We know that increasing accountability, student work that benefits classmates, and meaningful discussion offers intrinsic motivation adequate to create a great learning environment.

The technology based lesson plan for transformative learning provided an excellent opportunity to flex what we know about the aforementioned to create a lesson and experiment with creativity without risk of failure. The environment created by the course made it easy to discuss with any classmate concerns, problems, or questions that arose as a result. The opportunity to experiment and explore new realms of instructional practice with support may have been the greatest asset of the course. It also boosts confidence in student educators that they might need to use these and further explore tech use in the upcoming year and beyond.

In terms of practice, I have been able to reflect positively on my situation and abilities to produce a learning environment in my classroom that incorporates best practice and psychological theory with tech applications. But I have more to offer. With what I have learned here, I will be able to alter existing projects to better fit the needs of my students and my curriculum. I will also be able to recreate lessons that will involve technology to serve a more integral role. I will also be able to apply educational technology solutions to problems of practice that colleagues face. This experience has

brought me closer to an ability to offer solutions across the district in which I teach.

Technology has much to offer education. With what I have learned here, I can function as a driving force for the future; someone who knows what is best for educating students in the 21st century with the means of creating the best for his students and community.

Works Referenced

Mishra, Punya, "Situative Cognition in Educational Psychology," PowerPoint Presentation, Summer Cohort 2007, Michigan State University, June 25, 2007.

Shulman, Lee S., "Taking Learning Seriously," Change, July/August 1999. Volume 31, Number 4. Pages 10-17, Accessed 7/17/07, <<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/pub/sub.asp?key=452&subkey=618>> .