

Teachers and Dungeon Masters; Authority in the Technological Classroom

Matthew M. White

In a time when technological advancements and implementations into everyday life have become literally indispensable from our society, so too has the onus grown on teachers and educational professionals to proficiently utilize educational software and hardware to more efficiently deliver lesson material and content to students of all ages. This responsibility to upgrade, and increase proficiencies with all manner of technology is a daunting task for many educators; particularly those who chose their profession before the technological explosion of the previous decade. One of the greatest challenges faced by educators is to continue to act in a teacher role, and maintain their authority in an increasingly digital world. Teachers of the current era all too frequently promote doubt and confusion among students by turning to them for answers when a printer is jammed, when a computer freezes, or when toner runs dry. In order to maintain a level of confidence and respect from students, teachers must continue to teach, and learn from the experiences to which they direct their students through their further education, and experience. Many of the potential risks to teacher authority, and direction of their classrooms lie in technology advancing faster than educators; this essay intends to thoroughly examine both this, and other potentially negative effects of technological integration into the education system on students, and on the autonomy and authority of the classroom teacher.

The role reversal of learner and teacher is mentioned repeatedly by Starla Stensaas in Radical Pedagogy, and is often used therein, and by many other contemporary educational writers as a serious consequence of technology integration. Further woes are mentioned by Glori Chaika, educator and journalist for online teacher resource educationworld.com, and education professor Dr. Stephen Krashen in their articles and publications demonstrating the woes of both physical and emotional ramifications of full technology integration; some of which include “visual” (Chaika, p.4), “postural”

(p.4), and “repetitive-motion” (p.4) injuries, and the “potential danger of emissions” (p.4) from aging monitors and systems, as well as promoting lifestyles that are “sedentary” (p.4), and are not conducive to the growth of healthy “social [...] skills” (p.4). The common theme between these three publications, however, seems to be one of misinformation, sweeping generalization, and overt bias that seems to avoid focusing on how technological integration might actually stand to benefit students so long as teachers manage to keep pace. In Chaika's article, she goes so far as to include text branding educational software as “not only worthless but possibly damaging” (p.7), and having “contributed nothing of note to the learning process”(p.7), furthermore, Stensaas states that “...there is simply no way to be expert in all aspects of the technology, and even as one does 'master' a particular piece of software, shortly the newest version arriving on the market quickly repositions such a master as novice.” (Stensaas, p.14). With all of these serious allegations of maladies and detriments that seem to rise out of the integration of educational technologies, one begins to question the validity, or the value of such an endeavour.

The first and perhaps most prevalent of these potentially deleterious effects is the dissolution of the role separation between teacher and student which is asserted by Stensaas, and which is largely the misinformed product of poor teacher training. While Stensaas and others mentioned previously do mention this divide, it seems to register poorly in the minds of other authors who assert that this is the direct result of teachers who “lack training” (Holloway 33), and have extremely young pupils “whose technological competence may outstrip their own” (33). Inasmuch as teaching is a profession, and a skill in which one utilizes tools and resources to deliver a meaningful service, or product to students, pencils, paper, chalkboards, and indeed computers are the very tools of the trade, and must be used with some level of expertise, lest we as educators fall into antiquity and lose the respect and attention of our audience. Stensaas regards the divide between teachers and students as the result of a generation of pupils who “learned to use [...] technology as children—along with sophisticated video games” (p.9), she further asserts that students in this generation would prefer to conduct research “on the web rather

than in the library” (p.9), choose “the ATM rather than the bank lobby” (p.9), or utilize “voice mail or email to solve problems rather than asking for a customer service representative” (p.9); while this may sound convincing, and a good deal of those statements made by Stensaas are indeed true, the digitized contemporary world demands that teachers increase their training to meet the needs of the students of this, and future generations. Many schools attempting to integrate technology into their curricula, or even deliver courses, homework databases, or electronically delivered marks are “ill-prepared in terms of teacher competence” (Meredith 92), and some of these educators are “threatened by [student technological] competence” (Holloway 33). Holloway goes so far as to brand contemporary educators who choose to avoid the presence of technology in their classrooms as “contemporary Luddites” (33), and mentions several case studies where students were accused of removing or threatening teacher authority by helping other students with technological issues (30-36). In exactly the same manner as a teacher would resolve him or herself to studies if he or she were repeatedly looking to students for guidance with lessons or course content in English language arts, mathematics, biology, or any other subject area, so too should teachers who find their technological competencies somewhat lacking; “teachers' participation in action research in teaching and learning with computers is essential for technology restructuring in the school” (Johnson 82). The divide that exists between teacher and student in this regard is strictly the responsibility of the teacher, and he or she must endeavour to ameliorate his or her computer and technology skills in order to “become the expert[...]” (82) in the classroom once again.

Other mentioned maladies include the potential for physical injury or atrophy as the result of extended computer usage, which is stemmed entirely from poor implementation, lack of proper equipment and funding, and misinformation. In Stensaas' article, she states that “On-line delivery as it is currently constructed, focuses on content above all else and I do not believe the future of education lies in teaching 'information.' In all disciplines, not just those with a strong technological component, such a content-based focus will not serve the learners of tomorrow.”; while at the time of publication

this may have held true, modern conceptions of educational technology have paved the way for social interaction directly linked to the computer – ten years ago, the thought of being able to speak to, see, and hear a dozen people at one time on a computer screen was virtually inconceivable, and this is only a very iota of the educational potential of technology. Furthermore, while many teachers hold computer use to be a waste of time due to the veritable plethora of distractions available at the stroke of a key, again, teacher training and disciplinary ability, coupled with further integration stand to solve this perceived dilemma. An available IT technician, or manager within the school can very easily be an active participant in the monitoring of student technology usage, however, we see that “IT Technicians often work in an inaccessible area behind security doors” (Nettelbeck, 7) when present, “[...] few seem to be aware of the details of curriculum” (7), and are often regarded by teachers as “focus[ing] on tweaking or modifying the network and delivering clever solutions to problems that don't relate to educational outcomes” (7). Furthermore, student access to computers in a large number of North American schools is somewhat restricted; “computers are concentrated in IT labs, and access [...] is largely limited to lesson times”. (Holloway 34). The coupling of variably present IT managers, assistants, and technicians, whose jobs are often taxed by problems which could be fixed on the spot, as well as the cloistered nature of computers and technological advancements in many schools lead to the disciplinary and pedagogical problems we see happening in the classroom. A student in a school with mixed technological integration, such as the aforementioned IT lab situation, will more likely immediately plunge into mischief and sporadic attentiveness, as he or she has much less time to become accustomed to the use of the computer as an educational tool, working cooperatively with the classroom teacher.

Regarding the notions of direct physical consequences as a result of computer use, again we see the three main causes being poor implementation, lack of proper equipment, and misinformation. One of the major physical detriments of the computer is the repetitive-strain-injury, the most common of which is carpal tunnel syndrome, a condition of the wrists which causes immense pain and numbness

proceeding to loss of use of the hands and digits as a result of repetitive motions and stresses. While computer keyboards and mice have been linked to repetitive strain injuries, so too have writing implements, bicycles, hammers, scissors, screwdrivers, staplers, buffers, grinders, mixers, and an innumerable amount of other tools and implements used repeatedly both in education, and in an individual's daily life. (Jameson 71-90). In addition, sports pose a risk of repetitive strain injury (71-90) as well, despite physicality in education being highly valued.

Another physical concern is the modern plague of obesity in youth, which is a very serious problem. While it is indisputable that countless vegetative hours in a chair at a desk in front of a computer will lead to obesity, and an increased risk of a variety of lethal illnesses later in life, this is also true of all sedentary activities, such as reading, creative writing, research, and studying. In a school environment where physical education is not mandated, students largely sit, aside from the transfer of classroom, from the time they arrive until such time as they are dismissed; even in the presence of mandatory physical education, students still sit for the largest portion of their school day. Changing the means of progressing through the day's lessons will not increase the time that students spend sitting, or exerting little physical effort. Furthermore, proper implementation of technology might serve to increase participation in gym classes; technological advances in electronic entertainment have led to the use of video games and electronic gaming equipment to increase the physical activity of children, students, and even senior citizens. Laser tag, a game which involves electronically firing beams of light at other players is as active and physical a game as dodge ball, or paintball, and requires the same notions of teamwork and sportsmanship, and has been shown to work effectively in physical education (CBS Worldwide, p.3). Furthermore, Dance Dance Revolution, a video game copyrighted by Konami Computer Entertainment in which players must act out dance moves as illustrated on screen in order to attain a higher score is an immensely physical endeavour which has also been used in gym classes to encourage participation both during and after school hours (p.5). Finally, the Wii from Nintendo has been utilized to encourage physical activity in senior citizens homes to fight the effects of

arthritis and osteoporosis (Wischnowsky, p.1).

As we can clearly see from our previous examinations, most problems arising from the integration of technology are the result of misinformation, lack of proper equipment, or improper implementation. As technology increases as an educational tool, so too must educators increase their proficiencies with all manner of technology. Furthermore, in the school of tomorrow, computers will be as indispensable as textbooks, as such, it is imperative that boards and administrators allow reasonable budgets for technological integration. Finally, and perhaps the most important, is the notion of the implementation of technology in a manner which is conducive to meaningful and productive pedagogy, which is the responsibility of the classroom teacher, the IT managers, and the administrators to deliver effectively. “The teacher who has both the right and competence to make important decisions [regarding technology integration] will strive toward new ideals and new behavior in a positive manner when in a proper environment” (Adams 39); that is to say, when educational technology is properly integrated, it stands not only to improve teacher authority in the classroom, but also to improve the realization of educational outcomes, and generally create an environment that is conducive to measurable learning.

While there are numerous instances where technology has been used to improve the learning process in the modern classroom, some of the more iconic are presented by D. LaMont Johnson. He cites examples of teacher education students helping second graders learn to read using email and related software (Johnson 47), electronic pen-pals (60), using chat programs to aid students with hearing impairments (30), and inculcating early research methods in fourth-graders (73). When the teacher is properly able to “integrate technology into curricula, and engage [his or her] students in dynamic learning activities with computers” (Johnson 82), we see little to no effect on the authority or autonomy of the classroom teacher; in fact, teachers who fail to properly integrate information technology are often “fearful of encountering problems” (Holloway 33), or “threatened” (33) by the use of classroom technology, leading to a “resist[ance of] its wider incorporation within the curriculum”

(33). Teaching as a profession is ever changing, and all too often we hear the adage that 'teachers are lifelong learners'; if this is truly so, the teacher refusing or resisting the integration of information technologies into his or her classroom becomes no different than the teacher who resists the calculator in favour of the slide-rule or abacus.

The ideal role of the teacher becomes comparable to the role of the the “Dungeon Master” in the pen and paper game “Dungeons and Dragons”, pioneered and created by E. Gary Gygax, and based around a series of reasonably rudimentary mathematical operations.

Dungeon Master[s must] first design a game world on paper, and then lead a group of adventurers on a game 'campaign'. Every event that happened during the campaign was a combination of chance (dice throwing), and the story-weaving ability of the [Dungeon Master]. Due to the chance element of the game, sometimes the turn of events within the campaign made the imaginary play too difficult, or too easy resulting in players losing interest. Hence, a DM had the power to keep the story going and the adventure interesting and fun for the players. [...] Teachers may eventually take on the role of DM's in educational online games and lead their students on weekly game campaigns to conquer new lands, slay dragons, rescue princesses, and learn mathematical and scientific formulas. (Aldrich 344).

Insomuch as the teacher is the educational – and in some cases entertainment – leader of the classroom, he or she has a duty to direct the learning in a manner that is productive and meaningful, and to cater material to his or her respective classrooms, and he or she only does this through careful study, and honest knowledge of his or her subject matter, and all of the tools used to deliver that subject matter – including educational and instructional technology. The world of education today is very different from when some current educators first entered the profession, in fact, “since 1984, the percentage of children with home access to computers has steadily increased from 15 percent to 76 percent in 2003” (Child Trends DataBank p. 5). Educators of the day face being antiquated, or losing

their authority over students, as well as any educational influence they may have only so long as they continue to let their proficiencies and qualifications in educational technology dwindle. Enforcing the notion that teachers indeed learn for life, it is time for teachers to reclaim their authority, autonomy, and unparalleled ability to deliver information to children by sitting down, logging in, and brushing up on the latest advances in instructional technology.

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