TEACHERS AND TECHNOLOGY: WHO'S THE BOSS?

An Editorial

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This past week, I sat in a small, windowless room with the express purpose of talking to a blank screen. I had been asked to participate in a Skype conference, and - for the first time - unaccompanied by an adult (otherwise known as a technician). Yes... Arne did set up the machine, align the entire program and show me how to work it with detailed instructions. But, it was my responsibility alone to push the “call” button and contact the meeting coordinator. So, after Arne left me to my own devices, I sat there with a bead of sweat on my upper lip as my finger twitched to push that button. My mouse hovered for a while, and then... I hooked up. It was almost instantaneously answered and the coordinator's familiar face floated on the screen. Courting hubris, I congratulated myself on this operation. We actually chatted for a few minutes when she received another call. All of a sudden things started to become choppy and disoriented on the miniature world in front of me. Then the coordinator said the last words before the image went inky black: “hmmm... maybe if I press this...”

I sipped my coffee and doodled for quite some time. The minutes scrolled by on the computer screen as it boldly stated that I was still connected - however, no further action happened. Just like a NASA mission, I decided that ground control had probably lost contact, or didn’t know the proper procedure to get me back into orbit. In an attempt to wrestle some control, I decided to “troubleshoot”. Using the upmost of skills that Arne had taught me, I broke the connection and re-dialed. Once again, I was re-established and saw my coordinator’s floating head. Only this time she did not seem so happy to see me. “Oh,” she groaned, “I finally got the other four on the screen. When you broke in you seem to have disconnected everybody else.” Her words made me feel a little felonious.

In order to make amends, I took her phone number, just in case, and rang off so she could re-establish the others. Out of ideas - I had shot my bolt of Skype troubleshooting - I ran down the hall to flag Arne. He looked up from the Smartboard he was working on and asked if the coordinator had inputted my address in the conference connection. “I, uh,
don’t think so”, was my wavering reply. He rolled his eyes and muttered, “Bloody amateurs... if you’re not added, then Skype will treat you like an outside call. When she answered, it would cut everybody else off.” I borrowed Arne’s cell-phone and called the number she had given me - only to reach her secretary. Unfortunately, when I said I wished to speak to her employer, I was firmly informed that she was in an important Skype conference and could not be disturbed at this time.

Now, I would imagine that anyone reading this tale of woe would not fail to make connections of their own. Surely, a variation of this has happened to every person who had decided to venture out in the world of digital technology. Some would be thrown completely by this experience and swear off the electric demon until some distant future when it could read engrams. Others would continue to surf this technology, blindly careening from wave to wave, not quite aware of what’s happening as the mist and spray surrounds them, ultimately dragging them down to Bill Gates’ Locker. And then there would be others who would willingly put aside their chosen field of study, their spare time, their family and outside relationships to focus on what makes technology tick. All of these wrong-headed paths stem from the misbegotten concept that technology is an end onto itself. Many people “buy into” the flash of technology before understanding what a communication tool it can be to get across ideas and curricula (its real purpose). This point is made in detail by Rob Graham, Cora Roush and Liyan Song in their articles found within this issue, as they discuss the uses made by smart clickers in the classroom. Digital technologies, as pointed out by Nicholas Ng-A-Fook’s group, can also be a real source of empowerment for marginalized youth. As well, Sardar Anwaruddin’s study of computer-based technology in his course shows how language classes can be enhanced through its uses.

All four articles show, in actuality, that this new source of classroom support has the potential to make the experience more personal, constructivist and connected to the learning. However, I would repeat what all the articles also state explicitly or implicitly through their results: That a struggle ensues when various stakeholders fail to see the purpose of technology. Ultimately, digital technologies should be seen as no different from any other technologies (be it the pencil, the blackboard, the typewriter or the telephone). The main question that must be asked is how this tool can be used to enhance the classroom situation? How can it increase networks between humans? How can it make our lives easier as we pursue knowledge and enlightenment? How can it get us there faster? It is only when we rush headlong into embracing technology as a replacement for human connection, a replacement for human assistance, and a replacement for the human experience that we rush headlong into a battering wave with potential only to hurt us, not push us forward.