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When Teachers Don't Get It: Myths, Misconceptions, and other Taradiddle

By Jim Holland

Let me save you the effort of having to look it up, as I did...

Taradiddle n 1: silly talk or writing [syn: baloney, bunk, hogwash]

There is nothing more frustrating, perhaps, than a school district's spending literally millions of dollars on hardware and software for instructional use only to be met by a barrage of excuses from otherwise well-meaning teachers explaining why computer labs, projectors, digital cameras, and other exciting technologies are "not for them."

Here are some of their taradiddle:

"I don't have time!"

Yes, the world should bow in respect to all effective elementary school teachers - for they have perfected the art of spinning nineteen plates and juggling twenty-seven bowling pins while wiping noses, tying shoes, kissing boo-boos, and generally keeping the world turning on its axis. They spend innumerable hours preparing and teaching lessons for multiple subjects, gathering materials that usually can't be readily purchased in stores, and coaching students to pass standardized tests.

So it's no wonder that we often hear the "I don't have time" response to technology, even if it is placed before them. After all, technology is not yet evaluated on standardized tests. But the "I don't have time" response, usually the first of many, is a prime indication that the teacher just doesn't get what technology integration is all about.

Teaching technology skills is not something "extra". It's not the bacon whimsically added to a greasy cheeseburger. It's the grill that cooks the cheeseburger! I have never heard a teacher say to his or her principal "I'm sorry I couldn't teach my fourth graders how to distinguish between fact and opinion because I didn't have time." It was a required objective of the core curriculum, and thus the teacher found some way to teach it- using one method or another - even using technology. Richelle Brady, a third grade teacher in our district, taught the concept using a digital camera and a simple word processing activity. Students took pictures of themselves, downloaded the pictures to a computer, inserted the photo into a word processor, and wrote five facts about themselves followed by five opinions. Now, they are proudly on display outside their classroom. The students learned to distinguish fact from opinion (Language Arts curriculum objective) and also

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mastered many, many technology objectives as a by-product.

Kay Dibenedetto's class learned the ins and outs of PowerPoint as a result of a lesson in analyzing the characters, plots, and settings of stories they read – while covering a series of language arts objectives. Jennifer Edwards taught her first graders to describe the requirements of various jobs (first grade social studies objective) using Kidspiration. And the examples could go on and on. But the common factor in each is that the focus is on the curriculum, not teaching technology for technology's sake. These teachers are all as busy as any other elementary teacher, but they get it.

Teachers are right- they don't have time for anything extra. And until they change their perception of using technology as a tool integral to what is being taught many will continue to avoid technology – just as some people avoid asparagus and Brussels sprouts. Every trip to a computer lab ought to be accompanied by a *specific curriculum objective*. When asked what they are teaching with technology on any given day, a teacher's response gives away whether they get the whole technology integration concept. A teacher that replies "I'm teaching my students PowerPoint," doesn't get it- this type of teacher struggles with teaching technology as an "extra" thing added to the core curriculum standards. The teacher that smiles and starts explaining how she is teaching her students the pre-writing strategy of organizing their thoughts using Inspiration- that teacher gets it. It's not about the how-to's of a software application. It's the utilization of technology as a tool to teach core curriculum objectives- a concept that is backed time and again by pain-staking research.

"We don't have any good software to use."

I often wonder if the teachers who spout out this excuse open their pantry doors in their own kitchens and say "We don't have anything to eat!" and yet the pantry and refrigerator hold all the essential ingredients of a gourmet meal. What they really mean is "There's nothing in here for me to use to make a quick and easy meal without me having to prepare stuff ahead of time, stand on my feet and actually cook in my nine-year old oven." We've all resorted to corn dogs and frozen pizza a time or two.

And so it goes with technology. Teachers who are already so overwhelmed with all the pressures of meeting standardized testing goals and other mandates beg for something quick and easy – something that's wind-up and go. "OK, students, start such-and-such program, and for the next thirty minutes, do what it tells you." And who can blame them? These miracle workers truly are exhausted from all the demands heaped upon them from all directions. So what's wrong with just sitting back and letting technology teach students? Technology is supposed to make life easier, right?

There are many wonderful software packages/Web resources available that have the potential to enable teachers in this way. Some applications are designed so that students don't really need interaction with a real live teacher – students just log in and either choose the area where they want to uh... dabble... or the super-smart computer will prescribe a lesson that it thinks the student needs in order to better prepare him/her for the impending doom of the standardized test. Now, the right teacher- one who gets it- could certainly take these kinds of resources and use them to accomplish *specific curriculum objectives* as he or she actively guide students through the learning process rather than grading papers while students run free around the cyber world.

Since the trend these days tends to be toward purchasing and supporting open-ended software products (products that when used properly can meet all student technology standards), teachers who have relied upon these wind-up-and-go packages are stumbling upon Robert Frost's famed fork in the road. And the road less traveled is taken by those who "get it." Those who don't are in a great need for a paradigm shift.

So it's not that the software is not available or that the computers are too old - no, it's that the teachers who don't grasp technology integration have no clear focus of what they are supposed to accomplish with the available technology. These are the ones who have no *specific curriculum objective* when using technology in the computer lab. These are the ones who fulfill their obligatory time slot in a computer lab and go on their merry way claiming they have taught children - when in fact the children have learned very little other than how to launch an application. As far as software is concerned, teachers are holding in their hands a royal flush but are still wanting to play "Go Fish!"

The software and electronic resources they need are there - and in many cases absolutely free! But it does take some effort and planning - much like teaching math, science, language arts, and social studies. And for teachers who integrate technology,

planning how to use the available technology is inherent in planning their core lessons.

To be cynical, and with apologies to my well-intentioned colleagues, I wonder if software could speak whether it would say "We don't have any good teachers to use."

"I am not a computer person."

Well, maybe you're not, but face it – we live in a digital age - an age for which we must prepare our students. We weren't all born knowing how to double-click a mouse any more than we exited the womb reciting multiplication facts. We all learn in baby steps.

Staff development opportunities abound almost everywhere. Unfortunately, teachers are often mandated to attend training sessions that don't strengthen their weaknesses and often have little or no relevance. What's even more unfortunate is that so many professional teachers attend the required minimum number of training sessions to check off their to-do lists rather than striving to constantly perfect their craft - the illustrious art of teaching.

No one wants to be made a fool in front of her students- and technology can do just that very easily. The truth is that the moment a teacher steps into a classroom full of students, he or she immediately confirms that, yes, there is a generation gap. It is inevitable. And, yes, it may very well be that some students know more than their beloved teachers, but that's OK. What a teachable moment in the life of a student to promote lifelong learning!

"My students can't behave- they don't deserve going to the computer lab."

"Class, you have misbehaved today. And for that, you cannot learn how to compare fractions." Every teacher would agree that such a statement would be outlandish and absurd! Yet if a teacher is using technology as a tool to teach a *specific curriculum objective*, it's the exact same thing. Most often, teachers who use computer time as a "reward" are the same teachers who turn their students loose in the computer lab for free time - and attempt to rationalize it by likening it to going to the library to check out any book of their choosing - at least they're reading, right? And while that may be true (and often times it is not), students who are exploring their favorite Websites or playing games without a *specific curriculum objective* aren't learning a thing. Such a recess is very expensive.

While the use of technology is highly motivating, did learning at some point become an earned privilege and not a fundamental right afforded to all students in our public schools? Of course not! We should rejoice that we have in our hands a tool that students want to use! And we have 180 days a year to capitalize on that enthusiasm to teach the standards that our state and local agencies have mandated.

Let's not Beat Around the Bush

The excuses for not integrating technology and/or teaching the technology standards (mandated by law) go on and on, much like the one about the dog who ate last night's homework. And while most teachers would never accept such excuses from a student, many use the same reasons to get themselves off the proverbial technology hook.

"Johnny, why didn't you finish your homework?"

"I didn't have time."

"Maria, how come you didn't do your math homework?"

"I didn't have a mechanical pencil- you know, the one that sharpens itself when you turn the cap."

"And Michael, you didn't do it because..."

"I'm not a math person."

"OK, Ashley, tell me again why you didn't turn it in."

"Because you don't deserve it. You forgot to take attendance twice last week, remember?"

What's it going to take to revolutionize the way technology is used in our schools? It's going to take administrators who see the importance and potential of technology integration to lead from the top down. It's going to take a change in the way that staff development is done. It's going to require re-educating educators.

Above all, it's going to take teachers who are willing to change the way they teach. We will never reach today's students with decade-old lesson plans or with decade-old attitudes.

So, let's not beat around the bush and put a pretty face on what we call our schools' technology instruction. If it's free time in a computer lab, call it high-tech recess. If it's prescriptive drill and kill software, call it a substitute teacher. If it's a lack of knowledge, call it refusing to learn. If a class can't behave well enough to earn computer lab privileges, call it classroom mismanagement. But if it's a teacher who does whatever it takes to use whatever tool is available to give students every opportunity to learn — call that success — a teacher who gets it.

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