



When Techies Don't Get It

A colleague sent around an article, "[When Teachers Don't Get It: Myths, Misconceptions and other Taradiddle](#)" by Jim Holland that appeared on the *TechLearning* website. Go read it, and then come back.

OK, I can just hear all the marbles rattling as many of my fellow tech directors nod their heads in agreement with Mr. Holland.

But quite honestly, I was appalled by both the tone and message of the article. Mr. Holland seems not to have an empathetic bone in his body. (There was no bio in the article, but tracking back his e-mail domain, it seems Mr. Holland works for the Arlington, Texas public schools. I'm guessing he has some responsibility for technology.)

It's time to call out my alter ego, Norm L. Teacher. (Some guys get Spiderman. I get Norm. Life's not fair.)

When Techies Don't Get It

By Norm L. Teacher

Dear Mr. Holland,

Thank you first for adding a new word, "taradiddle," to my vocabulary. The time I spent reading your article was not wasted.

I am a fairly typical 9th grade Language Arts instructor here in Left Overshoe HS. I meet with five classes of about 30 children for 180 days each year. I am neither a Luddite nor technophobe. I have a computer at home with cable Internet access. I use it to do e-mail, to research and write papers for my graduate classes, to do my banking on-line and to play chess. I have a digital camera I use often. I can set the clock on my VCR.

Yet, I am one of those teachers you say offers "excuses." Such a pejorative term, "excuses," Mr. Holland. Let's both be adults here and call them reasons, shall we, and examine their validity.

"I don't have time," you offer as hogwash for not using technology "even when it is placed before [us]." My guess is that it has been a few years since you've been a classroom teacher, Mr. Holland. The name of the game today is accountability. I have state standards to which I must teach. There are state tests that students must pass. Technology is not mentioned in either of these. My goals as a teacher are to make sure my students master the curriculum and pass state tests. My job depends on me meeting these goals. Until technology skills are either a part of our standards or are tested, they will remain a means to an end, not the end itself, as much as this may disappoint you. And until technology proves more efficient or effective than traditional methods in helping me meet these goals, it will be a method I may in good conscience choose not to employ.

Let's look at your example of Ms Brady using a digital camera and word processing software to complete a "fact vs. opinion" unit. Lovely activity, but one that could be done in a class period with paper and pencil rather than in a week of class periods with the technology components. Having four class periods to reinforce the concept in other ways is a better use of time than possibly giving children exposure (certainly not mastery) of technology skills that will most likely be outdated in a couple years.

Our curricula are packed to the gills, sir. If you let me know which of the state mandated objectives I can remove in order to teach placing a digital photo in a word processing program, I'd be happy to give up this "excuse."

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

I have vehemently argued against canned, drill and kill software for quite some time. As a creative person myself, I understand the value of what you call "open-ended" software packages or I might call "productivity tools." These tools - word processors, graphic organizers, spreadsheets, databases, etc. - are the mental Legos with which my students can construct and display ideas. I don't like the teacher-proofed software any better than I like teaching with the worksheets that come with the textbook.

I *would* argue that we don't have sufficient and sufficiently reliable hardware on which to run our software. My classes of 30 use a lab with 28 machines, which I have never seen all running at one time. I share this lab with a dozen colleagues in my high school and scheduling is a nightmare. My technology director tells me that I should always have two lesson plans - one for when the technology works and one for when it doesn't. My response to this suggestion would be impolite so I'll just let it go.

When the district and state decide to make a financial commitment that will ensure me easy access to adequate, well-supported, fully-functioning equipment that shares with the analog telephone a 99.999% reliability rate, I will stop offering this "bunk" for not embracing technology more completely.

"I am not a computer person."

Actually you are right about this. I'd like to think of myself as a people person. And I while no one likes looking foolish in front of students (or anyone), I've never had a problem admitting personal ignorance on any topic - even to my students. My best staff development experiences in technology have been those when my tech savvy kids, bless their patient little hearts, have done the teaching. The kids teach me the in's and out's of *Word*; I teach them how to write compelling sentences with it. Pretty fair trade, wouldn't you say?

Please treat me as an adult learner when it comes to technology "training." I want an IEP, not a boot camp, where I am expected to endure classes on technology of small relevance to my style of teaching or my curriculum. I am sure a spreadsheet is a marvelous tool. I am sure I could learn to use it. I am just not sure why I would want to. Let me spend my scarce time, funds and energies looking at things that I as a "people" person would find useful - brain-based research, best practices in teaching writing, and differentiated instruction, to name a few areas. If you can integrate tech into any of these instructional practices, you bet I'll be there and listening.

Oh, and please use the principles of effective staff development when doing tech training - focus on student achievement, the use of professional learning communities and peer-mentoring. If you want me to be a better tech student, you'd better be a better tech teacher.

Mr. Holland, you techies think about technology 98% of the time and real people think about it 2% of the time. Call me a computer person and I'll just have to think of something nasty to call you back.

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

Sorry, I am one of those teachers who think (and are backed by research) that personal interest reading

increases reading skills. I also happen to think that students when allowed to use the Internet to research topics of personal interest are learning as well.

Despite your best efforts to drain the motivational quality of technology from school, you've not quite accomplished it. It remains still the best reason for its use that I have found. My kids do like to write when they are able to edit easily, do peer-review, and publicly share their work because of technology. I'm sure with filters, lock-downs, and limits, you techies will, with enough effort, manage to somehow make technology as thrilling as a basal reader. Keep up the good fight!

“Let’s not Beat Around the Bush” (Why did you capitalize this subheading and not the others? Your editor should be beaten with a copy of *Warriner’s Grammar*!)

You may not know this, Mr. Holland, but we teachers are not overly fond of being compared to children. It's not a way to win teacher friends. Especially when it is only because we are less than enthusiastic about technology - a movement that can be argued that has never been as much about teaching and learning as it has been about technology company profits.

Give us a little credit for being professionals. Show me the research that definitively shows the use of *any* technology improves student learning. Convince me that spending on plastic and silicon is more prudent than on early childhood education, lower class sizes, or better libraries. Tell me how the questions in Alliance for Childhood's *Fools Gold* and *Tech Tonic* reports have been answered.

Mr. Holland, when two people have different educational priorities or opinions, it does not make one an adult and the other a child.

Just because “Techs don’t get it,” doesn’t give me license to tease them. I could say thank you for your article because I not only learned the word “taradiddle,” but you allowed me to apply it immediately. But I won’t.

Sincerely,

Norm L. Teacher

Daniel Pink, in *A Whole New Mind*, calls empathy one of the skills needed to survive in the “conceptual age.” Until we as techies start empathizing with our teachers, administrators, and students, our efforts will go off course and we will get ulcers.

Happy to read any counter arguments from my techie friends.

Posted on Friday, December 2, 2005 at 03:12PM by [Doug Johnson](#) in [Educational technology](#) | [12 Comments](#)

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Reader Comments (12)

Doug, you're so great. I love it. Of course you're dead on, as usual. I hope you get lots of great responses and interesting online conversation on this - are you going to send it to the editors?

Of course the ongoing challenge is how to 1) be empathetic and understand systemic constraints upon teacher tech usage while 2) simultaneously continuing to advocate for more frequent uses of technology where it's appropriate and can enhance the teaching-learning process. Technology can create exhilarating, powerful learning opportunities, but we also know that "an object at rest stays at rest" - we need to help teachers figure out when / how / why tech should be used and help them begin moving in that direction IF we want those opportunities to occur for kids. The when / how / why is highly complex and locally contextualized, of course, and isn't as "sexy" a topic for a diatribe.

See you at TIES!

SCOTT

December 2, 2005 | [Scott McLeod](#)

My dearest wish for 2006 is that the constant references to

http://www.mnftiu.cc/mnftiu.cc/moustache_of_understanding.html (The Moustache of Understanding) will be replaced by references to Mr. Pink's book. Keep fighting the good fight.

December 2, 2005 | [Tom Hoffman](#)

And the techies always have the latest and greatest equipment which works perfectly and which they have time to troubleshoot should it not.....and as for the rest of us...we muddle along in a lab that has computers running WindowsXP and Windows 98 and try that with a room full of 6 year olds!

I blogged about my experiences with the Texas Techies last year.

<http://guusjem.blogspot.com/2004/11/and-they-wonder-why-people-abandon.html>

December 2, 2005 | [Guusje Moore](#)

Read Gussje's blog entry - TOO FUNNY! (and true).

December 2, 2005 | [Doug Johnson](#)

I loved your article! I'm a graduate student in library and information sciences, and a parent of four children, ages 4 to 14. I couldn't agree with you more, and wish I could articulate as well as you did to my school board and others, when as we purchase SMART boards, yet don't have librarians at all of our elementary schools and one of our kindergarten classes is twenty-five students. I shouldn't have been surprised when I saw you mentioning 'Alliance for Childhood', after reading Todd Oppenheimer's "The Flickering Mind", I was thrilled to find a group of like-minded folks in that organization. Thank you for writing this article and I hope it spreads around the Internet like wildfire.

December 6, 2005 | [kim madden](#)

After teaching middle and high school for many years I became a corporate trainer for a major technology company. I'm a real mongrel - a classics major who attended the Royal College of Music and now is an Microsoft Certified Professional. My request is a simple one: prepare me, and the rest of American business, graduates who can think critically and analytically, who can assimilate vast quantities of information and, finally, who can use technology effectively in their daily work. Those are my priorities in education. They haven't changed much over the years.

Rob

December 6, 2005 | [Rob Kennedy](#)

Doug,

Thanks, Thanks, Thanks.

I especially like the comment about the % of time that technology is effective as compared to the analog telephone (99%)! The barriers keeping teachers from using technology are REAL. And there are fantastic teachers out there continuing to be fantastic teachers without technology. When the barriers are taken care of more teachers will naturally use technology because it makes so much sense!

Janice

December 8, 2005 | [Janice Friesen](#)

I manage a team of software developers at a University where we build software for pedagogy and research. While it is directed toward the college level, we are entertaining its use in k-12. You bring up excellent points about proving the questionable merits of electronic media in education. Most likely we can accomplish a great deal more with investments in the basics.

That said, I think your letter would have been improved without the use of the pejorative phrase "techies."

December 13, 2005 | [Duane Gran](#)

Hi Duane,

Thanks for the note. I appreciate it.

I guess I personally have never considered "techie" pejorative when called that. But then I don't always get it when insulted. Is just "tech" better? I will try to mend my insensitive ways.

All the best,

Doug

December 14, 2005 | [Doug Johnson](#)

A very compelling counter. It is hard to move forward technologically in an educational system that is set up where teachers have very little time to collaborate and learn themselves. For those that are naturally drawn to tech stuff it is frustrating to not have the opportunity to use what is out there. How about the teacher caught in the middle of a broken system and an ever evolving learning landscape?

December 22, 2005 | [Regina Wagner](#)

Doug,

As I agree with many of your points, I must also disagree with your resistance to integrate technology into your classroom on a regular basis.

As an educator and consultant, I travel quite a bit to school districts across the United States. The one constant I have found to be true is that every district, every school, and every student is different! There is no one way to teach that will meet the needs of all students. However, I also know that students today are not your traditional students, nor can they be taught solely by traditional means (i.e. paper and pencil) As educators it should be our goal to explore all possible means by which to teach! We do know that technology can reach visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners! With that being said, is it not worth taking the time to learn!

Many teachers also express that they don't feel comfortable using technology because no one has taught them how. Turn the excuse or reason into an opportunity to model to your students that even you are a life-long learner. You may be surprised at what your students can teach you! Make it a joint learning experience..WOW, what a powerful message to send to your students!

With all the focus turning to the tests, I fear that educators are losing focus on what is most important. We should be teaching our students how to be life-long learners and not just to pass a test! By using technology, you are not only teaching them the objectives, but you are providing them with skills they will need to have in the "real-world". You are exposing them to a new way of learning that doesn't end with the last page of a book.

As much as it pains me, I also understand the pressure that teachers face to have their students pass the tests! However, students today are growing up in a society engulfed with technology. They are exposed to

technology on a daily basis either through video games, digital cameras, computers, etc. To not expose them to technology in the classroom is a disservice! Show them how technology can be used to expand their minds and not just their wallets!

Yes, there is a time and place for traditional teaching methods. There is no comparison between dissecting a real frog and doing it virtually. However, imagine the impact of using BOTH! Think about how much more fun teaching could be!

Regards,
Technology Advocate

January 4, 2006 | [Technology Advocate](#)

Hi Tech Advocate,

I am certainly not arguing AGAINST the use of technology here - only suggesting some reasons why teachers are reluctant to use it. I agree with all your points!

Doug

January 7, 2006 | [Doug Johnson](#)



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