

Chapter 8

Learning to Teach in Web 2.0

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents and analyzes an instructional practice developed in an Instructional Technology course required of Education students at Fordham University. The practice was employed to ensure a high level of engagement by assigning students the hands-on development of Web-based, instructional resources suitable for use with their own public school classes. The author describes the transformative quality of the assignment and discusses how it strongly supported students in forming a mental image of Instructional Technology as a viable, desirable dimension of their teaching practice. Discussed in detail are the attitudes and understandings about Instructional Technology of the students, the Web 2.0 tools and content items they selected for use in their projects, the ways they applied them to the instructional resources they developed, and how those satisfied their needs as teachers. The implications of the practice and how it evolved are presented in the broad context of how all those involved in teacher preparation programs may understand and apply them.

INTRODUCTION

In teaching a required Educational Technology course at Fordham University, my understanding of how the use of technology is perceived by new teachers has been both informed and changed radically. My efforts to provide my students with something of genuine value that they could

carry into their new teaching practices led me to see the traditional approach often taken in such courses, that of surveying the field of Educational Technology, as providing little of worth for them. Instead, I developed a term-long project that many students indicated resonated as a high point in their teacher preparation and continue to draw on now that they have entered the field. I feel this approach has some important implications for the design of teacher preparation courses intended to

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support and encourage teachers to make technology a vital part of their teaching practice.

In the following, I describe the project in detail and discuss why it was successful with my students. The intention is to analyze my experience with an eye toward identifying the universal needs of teachers, the factors that made the practice I developed flexible and broadly applicable to these needs, and the specific ways my students responded to the practice as well as the instructional resources they produced as a result. I include descriptions of the Web 2.0 resources and digital content items selected by my students, and the ways they apply them in their projects. Also, I present insights into how these directly address classic instructional issues within the context of today's typical schools and classrooms.

Background: Putting Practice in Context

In 1997 I was promoted from my citywide technology staff developer position with the New York City Department of Education to the post of Director of the Office of Instructional Technology, a citywide, central office position. The school system had just made its first, massive purchase of computers, installing a cluster of them in practically every middle school classroom in the city. Providing professional development and curricular support for the many thousands of teachers involved became my job, one I would hold for 7 years before retiring and taking up new challenges, including teaching Education courses.

Getting those first teachers to use the new computers in their classrooms proved to be a challenge for me and the many people I worked with. The pattern that emerged was one of older teachers, people to whom technology seemed foreign and off-putting, resisting its use and favoring paper-driven teaching with which they were comfortable (Gura & Percy, 2006).

New teachers must be exposed to ways of teaching with technology during formal teacher

preparation programs (Russel, Bebell, O'Dwyer, & O'Conner, 2003). However, I was dealing with teachers who had received their teacher education before the advent of technology placement in classrooms. In the years since this first experience, though, much has changed. The field of EdTech has matured (Pierson, 2005), with countless books, articles, conferences, online repositories of lessons and implementation guides, and other resources available to teachers. Teachers, too, have changed; the older ones eventually relenting and adopting technology under pressure of supervisors, parents, and students – at least to a degree. Newer teachers are generally familiar and comfortable with working with technology (Russel, et al., 2003). I expected to find a high degree of acceptance of the concept that technology has great potential for instruction by the new crop of teachers that has entered the field, young people who've come of age with computers, video games, and the Internet as part of the landscape of their everyday lives.

I was deeply surprised, therefore, as it became clear when initially interacting with my Fordham classes, that this group of younger students was quite resistant to the idea that technology had any real significance for their new jobs as classroom teachers.

The Challenge

Unlike the first groups of teachers I worked with, for whom technology was a mystery, these new teachers were very comfortable with computers and the web. However, they simply couldn't see how this fit in to the big picture of what their supervisors would expect of them or of what they personally hoped to do in their classrooms. Perhaps this was not so surprising. After all, as they shared with me, a great deal of what they'd encountered over the course of their own education took place in print-centric classes. Teachers need to conceptualize how the use of various computer programs facilitates teaching and learning. This can more easily be done if they actually see students

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