The Case for Digital Pedagogy

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The emerging reality of business and personal life in the 21st century is one of connectivity. The latest research on mobile technologies and online activities show clearly that technology is seen as a conduit to needed information as well as a mechanism for developing collective understanding. The Pew Internet and American life project recently found that 64% of people aged between 18-29 had used their mobile phone to retrieve information they needed, and that 42% had trouble doing something if their mobile device was not nearby (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Cell-Phones.aspx). Since late 2007, the number of people who used social media has massively increased, and it now accounts for 14% of all online activity - or one in every six minutes spent online (ComScore - http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2011/06/16/comscore-social-media-accounts-for-one-out-of-every-six-minutes-spent-online-in-us/).

Businesses are now seeking technologically adept school leavers, with social media proficiency and mobile development experience now regarded as key employment weaknesses for businesses (http://www.cio.com/article/667664/Four_Kinds_of_IT_Professionals_CIOs_Need_to_Hire_Now). Yet in our training grounds for 21st century employment, schools continue to argue against the use of emergent information and communications technologies in education environments.

This antipathy to technology in the classroom should be of serious concern to educators around the world. As speed and complexity of communication increases, it is likely that the relevance of traditional educational practice of instructor-led, chalk-and-talk teaching will continue to decline over time. Without adequate training in identification of reliable sources for information online, and without understanding on how to capitalise on emergent technology for collaboration and problem solving, students risk emerging from educational institutions without sufficient proficiencies to be employed in any line of business. While their recreational use of emergent technologies will have equipped them to communicate with one other, they will be entirely unaware of how to differentiate themselves from their peers. As such, even the most tried and tested educational methods will have failed them; they may be articulate and critical thinkers, but as technologically unsophisticated, isolated and disconnected workers, they will be relegated to unchallenging and uninspiring roles in the business world. Therefore, they will either be left alone to develop the skills in communication and problem solving that are needed in a fast-paced economy, or they will progress no further.

In a recent exercise on the purpose of education, UK educators asserted that the purpose of education was to challenge and to inspire; to produce environments that foster risk and innovation and to present to students, life as it exists in progress (http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6075468). If educators believe the purpose of education is so progressive and august, then the prospect of eliminating technology mediated educational experiences should be anathema. Instead, it should be considered to be the responsibility of education systems to equip students with understanding of the opportunities and benefits of emergent technology as a matter of course. Of course it would be foolish to suggest that all technologies are free from danger. But setting up barriers to adoption of technologies in the classroom on the basis of their potential dangers is a little like staying inside in case you might get run over by a bus: it produces a limited perspective on the outside world, and still won't prevent you getting battle-scarred by alternative sources. As such, it becomes crucial for educators to impart to students the range of potential dangers and to equip students with strategies for dealing with them as they arise.

Teacher unfamiliarity with emergent technologies and claims of unproven educational benefits from their use in the classroom should not be limiting factors in addressing the real world needs for adequately trained students. Rather than setting up barriers to adoption and participation, it is incumbent on teachers to inform themselves of the opportunities of emergent technologies across the curriculum, and to experiment with learning experiences for students. The old argument of lack of adoption of technologies simply doesn't hold in an era when the majority of students have mobile phones with full internet access. And the clichéd assertion that teachers don't have time to involve technology in the classroom demonstrates a lack of understanding of how technology should be used; it is not a matter of ‘adding technology’ to learning experiences, but rather deploying it as a tool for information access and problem solving. Educational content should not be bootstrapped to technology, but rather technology should facilitate content exploration. These are digital pedagogies, not traditional pedagogies with technology attachments.

There is now a range of new training programmes for teachers in digital pedagogies, providing skills in technology mediated learning, as well as exploring the range of ways and means of deploying digital pedagogies. Where teachers do feel that they are either insufficiently skilled with the use of emergent technology, or they feel that these technologies are ‘irrelevant’ to their discipline (a sure a sign as any that they are unaware of how digital pedagogies can and should be used), it is crucial that teachers investigate the opportunities for learning facilitated by the very technologies that so many educational institutions are seeking to ban.

No informed decisions can be made about the value and contribution of emergent technologies to learning experiences without adequate exploration of those technologies. Asian International College’s Digital Pedagogies (www.aic.edu.sg) course, for instance, focuses on the use of social media in learning, games in education, technology-mediated assessment and the range of mechanisms for deployment of technologies across various specific academic disciplines, thus covering not just how specific technologies may assist in learning, but also how specific subjects and teaching and learning can be fostered and augmented by technology-mediated experiences. Such courses are crucial to the development of education that is relevant for thriving, communications technology-rich business environments. And technology-mediated learning is vital for informed and valuable graduates of our educational environments.