Chapter 11
Finding Common Ground:
Uses of Technology in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

As technology's presence in higher education rises, so does its impact on culture. Scholars with vastly different opinions have written on what they perceive as the place of technology in higher education. This chapter aims at reconciling those differences. Rather than agreeing with one side over the other, this chapter takes its stance using a constructive hermeneutic in a postmodern age: understanding the limited and biased ground of one's own perspective and learning, which is the pragmatic good in a time of difference. Finally, this chapter offers a decision model for educators to evaluate the uses of technology in higher education.

FINDING COMMON GROUND: USES OF TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Technology is present in many higher education courses. With the advent of fully online schools and classes, hybrid courses, and the implementation of presentation technologies during lectures, a typical college student would be hard-pressed to receive a college degree without encountering some of these technologies. Educators, philosophers, and critical theorists have varied views on the subject, usually forming into two large camps: 1.) the people who believe that technological advances are good and we should embrace progress and 2.) the people who believe that technology is stifling education and deteriorating the learning process. This paper aims at reconciling the dichotomy between the two perspectives by providing an alternative view to the uses of technology in higher academics. I will begin with an overview of the debate on technology as an educational tool as it is understood in scholarly literature, focusing on the work of Neil Postman; I will then discuss the role of technology in education as it relates to distance and phenomenology; next, I will champion the concept of a constructive hermeneutic and explain how the philosophical perspective can be implemented in higher academics; and finally, the paper will conclude with a decision model for educators to evaluate the use of technology in higher education.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A study completed by Babson College estimated that over 6.1 million students, nearly one-third of all college students, took at least one online course during the fall semester of 2010; this was an increase of over 560,000 students from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2011, p. 4). As the number of students taking online-based courses continues to grow, so does the need to be cognizant of the effects of technology in education. The Babson College study also questions the comparable outcomes of face-to-face learning versus online learning. The first report of the study, completed in 2003, found that only fifty-seven percent of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face courses. The numbers have slowly but surely increased each year, peaking at sixty-seven percent in 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2011, p. 5). Although the numbers have increased, roughly a third of all participants, based on the responses from more than 2,500 colleges and universities, still believe that online learning is inferior to face-to-face learning. Even as the numbers increase for those in favor of online learning, there are still many professionals who question online learning's legitimacy.

While concerns with online courses are coming to the forefront, concerns with technology in the classroom have been expressed for quite some time. In the early 1980s, Neil Postman saw education's biggest problem as a "rapid changeover to a culture based on the electronic image. He describes the competition between television and schools (a competition the schools are losing) and suggests ways in which educators might best preserve the values of a traditional education" (Postman, 1983, p. 310). Postman had apprehensions about technology and education over 30 years ago. One of Postman's strongest claims is that the "Age of the Electronic Image" brought with it a discontinuous and fragmented curriculum (1983, p. 313). The

technologically-infused classroom has many of the same problems. A 2008 study conducted by Vanhorn, Pearson, and Child identified the major communication challenges of online learning. Among the list of challenges are the transition from a face-to-face classroom to an online class room, technological difficulties, communication issues, and the lack of community.

The lack of student interactivity can also affect the feeling of 'community' in the classroom. Students often feel isolated, as if they are taking an online course by themselves, rather than being part of a learning community in which they can share ideas and experiences with each other. (2008, pp. 33-34)

Much like Postman's "Age of the Electronic Image," the online classroom is creating a fragmented curriculum as the traditional sense of community fades away. Communication is now being mediated by technology, which in turn changes the education process itself.

The future of higher education may be unknown, but online courses are now part of the landscape (The Sloan Consortium, 2007). The question is no longer *if* technology will be a part of higher education, but rather a question of what to do with technology now that it is a part of higher education. Postman attempts to reestablish his scope:

What we need to consider about the computer has nothing to do with its efficiency as a teaching tool. We need to know in what ways it is altering our conception of learning, and how, in conjunction with television, it undermines the old idea of school. (1992, p. 19)

Postman's statement marks a clear distinction between "the old idea of school" and the implied new, technological age. The use of the term "undermines" shows that Postman does not see this shift as a natural change, but rather an eroding of the foundation of education. In his book *Technopoly*,

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