Riding the School Bus Called Technology

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INTRODUCTION

In the constantly growing and changing realm of teaching, learning, and technology, teachers are expected to embrace strange new technological mediums with enthusiasm and confidence. It is asking a lot! In our combined 10 years of working with teachers in the Virtual High School at the Marlboro College Technology Graduate Center, and in teaching the "Pedagogy of Online Learning" at Cambridge College, we have arrived at a few basic conclusions about what teachers *must* know and be able to do in order to have the best chance of success in the new millennium.

FIRST AND FOREMOST: SUPPORT

Teachers need to know they have the absolute support of their administration in the use and integration of technology into their classrooms. This means not having to fret away time when at home or during vacations—trying to figure out what works, how it works, and why it works. It means being given the time "on the job," as well as the resources and support necessary to venture into this new territory. Teachers must know they will be given time for learning, receive appropriate training, be fairly compensated for their work, and have excellent and knowledgeable technology support nearby.

We have found that the most effective and successful teachers were relieved of some building or teaching duties in order to have the time to explore and digest all the ways that technology can support learning. They were given laptop computers, and some were even provided with ISP (Internet service provider) connections in their homes. They knew who they could turn to when the technology failed, and they also knew who to reach out to for advanced learning. They were provided software that had been tested to work effectively and in support of their educational goals. As a result, they relished the opportunity to grow professionally. They knew that they did not need to worry about failure (read "repercussions") while taking the necessary risks or using up school time. They knew that their administration would give them time to learn and to apply their new skills in the most productive manner possible. Conversely, we found that many teachers who had less success did not have administrative and/or technical support. They had been handed "one more thing" to do and learn—in addition to a full and already impacted, day.

SECOND: EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THAT FOSTERS COLLABORATION BETWEEN TEACHERS

No one learns well in a vacuum; why should teachers be expected to do so? A single afternoon workshop to train teachers in how to create a PowerPoint presentation, for example, is not enough. Learning opportunities should extend beyond a single lesson.

Professional development should model effective teaching and learning practices, and involve groups of teachers in projects that are relevant for use in their own classrooms. Training sessions should bring teachers together (face-to-face or online) to work toward a common goal. A sense of cooperation and collaboration should exist between them as they work in small groups to learn and create a technology project together. Far more learning will be accomplished in this way, rather than by having teachers struggle separately and on their own.

Teachers need to be able to sort through all the "garbage" that is presently being sold on the market, and find software and Web sites that will enhance thinking and learning skills in their classrooms. Schools that establish collaborative networking practices between their teachers ultimately end up saving time and money.

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Teachers discover that technology and the Web are not new-age replacements for work pages, but rather opportunities to foster greater work collaboration and critical thinking in their students. By sharing both positive and negative technology experiences, teachers extend and deepen their understanding of the technology, and save each other from having to constantly reinvent the wheel.

FINALLY: TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW WHAT THEY ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR

When individuals study for their driver's license, they are not expected to be "master mechanics." (Many actually don't know how to change a flat tire!) They are expected, however, to know the rules of the road, be able to demonstrate sound judgment, and to show respect for other drivers. Many teachers are gripped with the fear that they need to be "techno-geeks," master programmers, or hardware engineers in order to effectively use technology to promote learning. When we stress the need for tech support, we mean a teacher needs to know s/he has access to the AAA of technology: support that is quick to respond to her/his needs and that is available, at all times. Armed with that knowledge, a teacher will bathe in the comfort of being able to focus on education and learning, rather than on the technology. As we have said repeatedly, the technology is just a faster school bus providing access to learning.

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