

Driven to distraction

By Emily Hehir

I am in a room with 27 13-year-olds and I am waging a war against distraction.

Unfortunately my students are addicted to the constant interference from inside and outside the classroom, delivered straight into their hands via their devices. Teachers have been battling the "staring-out-the-window-daydreaming" syndrome since chalkboards and corporal punishment were acceptable elements of a quality education. The problem now is the tool for distraction is not only a window to the outside world that talks back and beeps, it is the vehicle for the delivery of curriculum. We provide children with the laptops and iPads that enable their increasingly obvious attention deficit.



New technology in the classroom for its own sake will not necessarily build critical and creative thinking.

We do this because teachers and parents are being told technology is important and will improve student learning outcomes – if used correctly. Problematically, few teachers are trained in how to use technology in a manner that actually improves the outcomes previously achievable. Most schools have one or two "IT gurus" – teachers on staff whose personal interest has led to a process of classroom experiments with various apps and programs. All too often technology is a proxy for actual learning and is used as a reward, to simulate a task that could be done with a pen. At its worst, it just distracts.

The optimal context for learning, pre-service teachers are told in highly regarded tertiary and professional development courses, is a "student-centred" environment, featuring interactivity, student choice, "clickability", seamless integration of previously

inconceivable technology-enabled tasks and connection to a global, creative-thinking community. Discipline, detention, coercion and even stickers have been blacklisted, deemed to be inhibitors to the development of personal responsibility and motivation.

This idyllic notion of a 21st-century classroom is problematic on a number of fronts. It assumes a self-regulated, organised, emotionally well-balanced and intrinsically motivated student. It presupposes a student that has mastered their fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, which can now be utilised to engage in critical thinking and analysis. For better or worse, this is not most students.

And yet, despite this reality, teaching conferences, professional development training days and school curriculum all continue to aspire to be "collaborative" and "engaging" to foster "innovation" and "creativity" in students. Why does this sort of language matter?

Are these such bad things? Of course not.

However, what such buzzwords do is shut down debate on the details. This is not exclusive to education. Indeed, most policy documentation and professional learning is full of ideological rhetoric and catchphrases, without explanation of how practically and effectively to realise those grand visions in one's day-to-day work environment. Perhaps this is the purpose of this sort of "big picture thinking", to inspire and provide a vision for the future – one where magically we aren't hamstrung by the logistical challenges of the everyday. It is thought to be up to organisations themselves to work within their own context to flesh out the "how". The problem is, in the resource-poor context of a school, there typically isn't time to develop an evidence base for anything. It all ends up being so ad hoc.

At the risk of sounding like a Luddite, I respectfully acknowledge the impressive work of teachers across the country whose use of technology does improve their teaching, by, for example, embedding interactivity into presentations or checking student understanding through collaborative tools that allow for real time data collection.

But technology in the classroom for its own sake will not necessarily build critical and creative thinking. Especially when students are so supremely distracted by iMessage, AirDrop, Facebook, Google chat and the constant stream of email that they literally can't concentrate to hear and follow instructions.

We are educating the first generation to be born post-WiFi, but this doesn't necessarily require us to throw out fundamental teaching principles and bestow students the autonomy to "go forth" and discover the world online for themselves. Rows, books and writing need not be seen as dirty, shameful teaching practices. A student might even stare out the window rather than into a screen once in a while.

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