

Technology in Education

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A typical teenage girl texts her best friend for about an hour. She logs on to her computer and checks her Facebook and Twitter accounts. She catches up on her favorite TV show, “The Bachelor,” on Hulu. However, there’s a slight issue. It’s a school night. She texted her friend after school before she started her homework. After completing part only part of it, she just had to check her Facebook and Twitter. Once dinner was over she watched episodes on Hulu. Her homework never got done that night. She rushed to finish her homework the next day, right before the class started.

Does this sound familiar? In this particular instance, technology is a major distraction from this girl’s education. This could happen to any student regardless of their age, sex, race, or reputation. Some students might struggle to finish their assignments because they have an after school job. For others, the reason might be practice for a sport or play.

However, we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and nearly every teenager is attached to at least one form of technological device. Some people might be able to send 100 texts in a minute. Many teenagers have iPods with eight gigabytes of storage, and they are completely full with music, TV shows, applications, photos, and more. Not to mention, it sometimes seems as though half the planet is addicted to “Call of Duty” or some other video game craze. With the way technology advances, who knows what will be next.

A recent survey of Aurora High School (AHS) students (November 10, 2011) polled some interesting statistics on cell phone usage. Ninety-four percent of students said that texting was one of the most time-consuming activities they did on their cell phones. In addition, 67 percent of students said they would take a break from homework to answer a text. Thirty percent of students said they would drop whatever they were working on—even if they were in the

middle of a math problem—and text back a response. The natural response to these statistics is to assume that teenagers, at least at AHS, are addicted to their cell phones. What makes this interesting is that 28 percent of the students said that they used their cell phones for more than four hours a day, and 28 percent use their cell phones for less than an hour. This leads me to believe that regardless how much time you dedicate to technology, it is a priority.

AHS senior AJ Farrand (personal communication, November 13, 2011), regarding his life without a cell phone, said:

Without my cell phone I would have soooooo [sic] much more time to do other activities. I don't think I would use that time very wisely, though, but I'm sure eventually I would get so bored that even I would do my homework. I would also probably know like [sic] eight languages by now.

Clearly cell phones can distract teenagers from schoolwork that they need to accomplish. However, with social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, the students should be able to control how much time they dedicate to being online. For many students, getting on social networking websites can be a break from the tedious amount of homework assigned. The big question is how long do these breaks last? AHS senior Maggie Schneider (personal communication, November 13, 2011) said this about social networking websites:

I like to break my homework up with Facebook and Twitter so I can refocus with more attention. My intent is usually to spend 10 minutes maximum and then go back to doing homework. I usually end up talking to someone on chat or lose track of time 'creeping' around, so it always ends up consuming way more time than I want it to.

Even when students are at school, with social networking access blocked, they still manage to find ways to lose focus from their schoolwork. AHS teacher Dr. Cathie English (personal communication, December 5, 2011) had this to say about keeping her students on task:

When we first got [the laptop labs], I used them a lot because I liked the idea of a student at his or her space focused on their laptop, rather than in a lab setting where students usually sit wherever they want and where they get distracted and where they have already established bad habits of socializing.

So technology can provide us with plenty of distractions from our schoolwork regardless of where we are. But could anyone actually live in a world without technology? Just because students get distracted doesn't mean technology cannot be beneficial, especially when it comes to our education.

Teachers are more than capable of integrating technology in their classrooms. When asked to give a brief description of her technology usage in classes, Spanish teacher Mrs. Kara McNeese (personal communication, November 12, 2011) said this:

I use technology in not only the delivery of content, but in student practice activities and student performance products. Specifically, I use PowerPoint and Prezi to deliver content as well as short youtube [sic] clips, authentic cultural websites, and various videos. In student practice, I use Quia, conjugemos.com, and a site in which I made arcade games for practice. In student products, I have them produce PowerPoints, Prezis, brochures, videos, etc. Additionally [sic], I have my own website available in which I load the assignments.

Mrs. McNeese is well known for her projects using technology. Farrand also had this to say about McNeese's Spanish classes:

Every chapter we do a big project, and one chapter I decided to make a video, which is already more than most teachers use for technology, and she said for everybody to post videos on YouTube. This was a really easy way to share the video [sic] and I don't think that most teachers at AHS could pull even that off...she doesn't necessarily use state of the art, new fangled technology, but she does an excellent job of using what we know how to do and are comfortable with and putting that just as much into the curriculum as the classic pencil and paper assignment. (2011)

AHS art teacher Mrs. Sarah Wegenast (personal communication, November 13, 2011) is also well known for her use of technology with her curriculum. She had this to say about her utilization and quality of the school's technology:

I use technology in every class and grade I teach. The global information at our fingertips and engaging students in the learning process with technology is a must in all disciplines. It is not about the software programs, the newest hardware, as much as it is understanding how technology can be used to reach students in an effective way that produces the best learning environment. I get excited about the projects and or the lesson when using technology as well as the students. If a teacher is engaged and excited it is more likely the [sic] the students will be as well.

Both Farrand and Wegenast agree that our school doesn't have the latest or greatest technology, but the teachers and students make the most of what we have. About 44 percent of students (AHS Survey, 2011) say that on a scale of one to five, with five being the highest, they would give AHS a three, regarding the quality of the computers. Natasha Hongsermeier, a senior

at AHS commented saying, “Some computers are really new and nice and user friendly; however, there are still a few dinosaurs out there. And it is a little unnerving how the A+ lab sounds like a jet taking off” (AHS Survey, 2011).

Students and teachers alike are aware of the variety of machines around the school. When asked how he was satisfied with the quality of machines in the school, Tony Scism (personal communication, December 6, 2011), Aurora Public Schools’ technology director, said:

We keep machines until they serve no purpose. We have labs that are good for word processing and general web access and other machines that are good for Accelerated Reader and that is about it. I would love to have the money to purchase updated machines for all of our labs and laptop carts.

That’s pretty much what it boils down to: money. Wouldn’t it be great to live in a world where money was never the issue? AHS assistant principal and activities director Tim Huls, (personal communication, December 6, 2011) said, “There has been discussion in Administrative [sic] meetings in regards to getting ‘caught up’ with the district’s technology needs. [But] where do we get the funds? That is the big question that is holding us back.” Huls continued, “There have only been brief conversations in regards to becoming a [one to one] school. Most of the talk is now centered around updating and upgrading the current computer labs and possibly adding an iPad mobile lab” (2011).

Becoming a one to one school, i.e., one laptop for every student, would definitely be a major upgrade from the current A+ lab. Personally, when I heard this, I thought it sounded too good to ever become a reality. Our school can barely afford to buy pink passes. What’s the point of ever wishing for one laptop for every student? Even so, when asked if a one to one

system would be feasible for AHS, specifically economically, superintendent of Aurora Public Schools, Damon McDonald (personal communication, December 6, 2011) said:

Absolutely, however it may take a few years instead of months to become financially solvent to purchase the quantities of devices our district needs to meet the needs of all students. There needs to be a priority shift within the school's budget to plan for the infusion of technology.

Mr. McDonald also commented that the most common question he received was does technology help test scores? He responded with, "It doesn't hurt them" (2011).

From a teacher's perspective, AHS math teacher Rick Titus (personal communication, December 12, 2011) previously taught at a school that implemented the one to one system. He added:

It was nice [to] have accessibility for all students. They were also responsible for keeping it charged, much like their cell phones. For the most part it did reduce much of the paper flow. Many of the worksheets were placed online and students had access through the internet. Most were copied and filled in, then emailed to their teachers through a variety of software packages.

Mr. Titus also commented on how the students used the computers saying, "The first year, we made the mistake and gave students administrative rights to the computers, and many students downloaded games and music. The second year, we fixed that and the computers were used more appropriately." (2011)

I have no doubt that there are students at AHS that would use their own personal laptop to get involved in similar shenanigans, given administrative rights. Without these rights, the educational value of having a personal computer is elevated simply by the lack of games and

other distractions. Furthermore, students from financially strained families can have access to a more reliable machine. There is also added convenience to being able to use a computer that is not shared with anyone else, specifically other family members. It can be a big time saver to not have to wait to use a computer.

Mr. McDonald is also no stranger to the one to one system, as his previous school, Arapahoe Public Schools, implemented it. When asked what the biggest benefit was, he replied:

The greatest benefit is putting technology such as a laptop computer, the wireless infrastructure and interactive whiteboards in the hands of teachers and students. We wanted to create a learning environment that included the utilization of technology to enhance our programs. Laptops, iPads, iPods, iPhones, etc... are the learning tools of today. School systems should adapt and utilize them as learning tools for students today and in the future. (2011)

Mr. McDonald is not alone in his thoughts. Dr. English also finds it important to include technology in her curriculum, saying:

I think it is really important to utilize the new literacies of the 21st Century because in my research at UNL, there is a lot of evidence to support that this generation of learners and those to come will be literate in a way that is completely different than in the past. How are we to teach literacy and language when the mediums that we use have changed in such a dramatic way? Also, to prepare students for employment, we need to give them plenty of opportunities to practice with the latest in technology. Schools and teachers need to stay abreast of the latest changes and school districts, if they have the financial means, must keep up with technological change. (2011)

I have to agree with both McDonald and English. Whether we like it or not, technology is (and rapidly becoming more so) a part of our learning environment. We need to embrace it and learn it. This is especially true of the community of Aurora, a place with plenty of self pride. Our school district has the ability to truly be on the cutting edge of technology, funding permitted. We are lucky enough to have teachers who are willing to learn how to use these new literacy methods advantageously in their classrooms; shouldn't we support it? Imagine what teachers could come up with if we each had our own laptop. For students, sure it's an added distraction, but as long as our work gets done eventually, isn't it more beneficial to our education in the end?

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