

PERSPECTIVES

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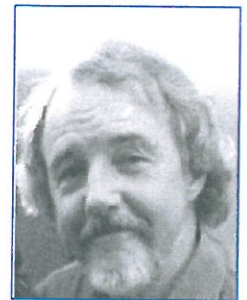
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How Can Teachers Deal with Technology Overload?



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Reader Response to:

Allan, J. (2009). Are language teachers suffering from technology overload? *TESOL Arabia Perspectives*, 16(2), 22-23.

In his recent article in *Perspectives*, John Allan reported giving staff development sessions on Web 2.0 to colleagues in Qatar where only ten percent attended. Speculating that this might be due in part to technology overload, Allan inventoried the technology competencies that teachers need in order to cope in the modern workplace. These include familiarity with CALL, Office applications, accessibility tools for special needs students, Internet resources, data storage, virtual learning environments, media editors and manipulation tools, learning management systems, security systems, a range of administrative software including gradebooks, virtual private networks (VPNs), software for human resources, and modern AV equipment such as interactive whiteboards and mobile communications devices.

I agree that teachers are challenged by a need to master so many new skills, but these competencies have been needed since the turn of the century, and the skill set has enlarged further in the first decade of the 21st century. Now, in order to do the job even better or possibly even move to another in the future, teachers also need to be familiar with some of the following skills and concepts (adapted from Stevens, 2008):

1. Web 2.0 and social networking
2. RSS and feed readers
3. Podcasts (harvesting and producing them)
4. Microblogging (e.g., Twitter, Edmodo)
5. Distributed and personal learning networks
6. Aggregation and tagging

7. Digital storytelling and applications of multimedia to new literacies
8. Communities of practice and connectivism
9. Informal / just-in-time (JIT) learning
10. Synchronous communication tools such as: instant messaging, online presentation venues incorporating interactive whiteboards, voice, and video
11. Asynchronous collaboration tools such as: blogs, wikis, Voicethread, Slideshare, Google docs, etc.

Allan suggests that technology competencies impose a burden, but isn't learning new technologies a responsibility? Many educators (Warlick, 2007) have made the point that it's no longer possible to learn in school skills that will sustain knowledge workers throughout their careers, nor to even assume that their profession will exist at the end of the next decade. In listing several college majors that didn't exist ten years ago, Fisch and McCleod (2007) point out that we are training students now for jobs that haven't been invented yet.

Prensky (2005) called on teachers to use technology in ways that would engage students, not enrage them and turn them off to learning. Prensky caused a stir when he said recently that teachers should not be allowed to use interactive whiteboards, whereas their students should (Stevens, 2009). An understanding of why he said that lies at the heart of what teachers need to know about technology.

Prensky's comments were prompted by his belief that the use of technology by many teachers tends toward the low end of a scale ranging from functional to transformational. In Selber's (2004) characterization of multiliteracies in the 21st century, functional literacy means basically coping

with the technology to meet current demands (and whether you regard technology as being *one of* those demands or as helping you *meet* those demands would place you somewhere on an attitudinal curve). The higher skills, critical and rhetorical, refer more to your ability to see where this is taking you and your students, and being able to manage that direction wisely, to understand the issues and then articulate them in discourse with others in your profession or network. Bloom's taxonomy has been revisited to incorporate digital skills (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001 from Forehand, 2005). Allan's listed competencies fall midway up that taxonomy (remembering, understanding, applying) whereas reaching the top of the taxonomy requires analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

All professionals suffer from technology overload. This load is not as heavy for teachers as it is in other professions (e.g., medical, engineering, chemistry, physics). Yet, teachers of students going into these professions are responsible for training students how to learn. Students need autonomous learning skills in order to keep on top of their professions when they get out in the real world. Since teachers are expected to model the adaptive skills needed, no teacher can rest on a static skill set (Stevens, 2007).

In our era, knowledge is no longer so much a matter of internalization of facts as it is the ability to locate facts when needed, utilizing a network of peers who can help you access information. The job of a teacher is in some respects to learn along with the students, partly by connecting with other teachers but also learning how to use technology to re-learn how to learn.

People entering the workplace now are deluding themselves if they think they can stay current in their field based on what they learned in college. Fortunately, teachers tend to constantly improve their skill sets through attendance at conferences and workshops and participation in online communities of practice, and administrators should be encouraging this

through reduced teaching loads and allocation of other resources.

Teachers might wish to avoid workshops when they sense that their participation is directed top-down, as prescribed by administrators who may not fully understand staff needs with regard to professional development. One solution is to offer workshops bottom-up, as something staff organize themselves. Ideally there are staff who feel themselves as part of a community of practice and who engage other members of the community in activities and discourse which would improve the practice of all participants. Wenger's studies (Wenger, 2004) suggest that it is not possible for employers to jumpstart communities of practice rather they must create an environment encouraging their growth.

Cofino (2008) lists conditions for getting an institution to make "the shift to a 21st century learning environment." While recognizing the importance of management providing "official acknowledgment of the vision and philosophy and clear expectations that change will happen," Cofino sees the need for officially designated change agents ensuring that infrastructure is in place, making clear why change is needed, helping formulate a framework for change, and seeing that models for change are translated into curriculum.

Once an institution grasps the need for a paradigm shift, then those farthest along in making that shift can help others transition to the other side. Because it is a paradigm shift, the old ways of managing this transition may not be the most effective. Part of the shift is encouraging networking through the use of "social media," thus enabling individuals to collectively take responsibility for their own learning in ways that management might upset if operating in more traditional top-down ways. In other words, rather than set up a series of professional development workshops taking place at times that might not suit everyone's schedule, teachers might be encouraged to organize training sessions themselves that would utilize synchronous and non-synchronous social media tools (perhaps not called "training" sessions outright). There are many models that might seed development through communities of practice: use of Nings, for example, or spontaneous un-conferences. Bar camps, LAN parties, and speed-geeking are all formats that focus

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spontaneity, informal learning, and class-roots energy into positive learning outcomes for those who participate (See <http://classroots.org/>; the other concepts are all covered in Wikipedia.)

Such initiatives reverse the directionality of the impetus to learn. Rather than the onus being on teachers to learn *prescribed* technologies, such events encourage teachers to scaffold one another as they might ideally interact with students, and when they do this using social media, they learn about the next generation of educational technologies while working together. In other words, rather than considering technology a burden, teachers should use it in ways seen to be effective with anyone assuming the role of student. But in order for this to happen, teachers need to be encouraged through sufficient time relieved from teaching and marking to develop productive professional networks and interact with them.

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TESOL Arabia would like to announce the publication of a new book titled ***Developing Oral Skills in English*** edited by Adel Jendli, Christine Coombe and Neila Miled.

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