

Technology Creates Opportunities for Student Learning

Peter Herman, VSBA President

Recently I attended a presentation on technology in schools at the National School Boards Association annual conference. In a stroke of genius, the presenting group brought along a 19 year old college sophomore to do most of the talking. He started by explaining how he spent a typical day: out of bed, checks his email, looks at 3-4 websites, checks his cell phone for text messages, maybe turns on the TV for a minute. On the way to breakfast he calls or texts several friends to organize the day, listen to some music on his MP3 player. Then he goes to his first class where he is lectured for an hour. After the seminar, I spoke briefly with him and complemented him on his presentation and marveled at how comfortable and confident he was with all these electronic tools. He thanked me and then said something that made me think about how we deal with our students in the public education system. "If you think that I know how to use this stuff, you should see my 12 year old sister."

That 12-year-old sister is probably in 8th grade, and I have no doubt that her classmates are as tech-savvy as her and her brother. There is so much technology out there that educators are, if not clueless about, way behind their students in its use and possibilities. Appropriately, computers are an important tool in schools today, but there is so much more. One of the stories the college student told was about a high school teacher he had who understood technology and how it has transformed the way kids operate today. At the start of one history class, she had the students pull out their cell phones. For the few who didn't have them (and there were only a few), she had a box of loaners. Then she told the kids they had 30 minutes to contact a student in another country (Canada and Mexico didn't count), find out something interesting about their school, and write it down. Each student was expected to make a short report to the class on what she or he learned. All the students completed the assignment.

We agonize over cell phones and texting in school instead of finding ways to incorporate all sorts of technology into learning. It is reminiscent of the great calculator debate where instead of teaching students to understand what they can do and to use them properly, many educators argue over whether the tool is appropriate. I'm sure that Guttenberg had some of the same discussions with the monks who were illuminating manuscripts.

Our students can be a great resource. A teacher sitting next to me at the conference wondered who would be available to provide some professional development so that she and her colleagues could learn how to use the technology that creatively. I suggested that she probably had 20 students in her class who would fit that bill. She acknowledged that was true, but confessed that she would be uncomfortable reversing roles and using her students as teachers, even though she recognized that they could do it pretty well.

In all our hand wringing about teaching students how to use technology, we overlook the fact that they already know it and could teach many adults a thing or two. What is

needed is to mobilize this knowledge for learning purposes and then turn the kids loose to use it effectively. Kids today, just like always, need direction and monitoring, but many are also more than able to take charge of their own education. As technology improves and tools like distance learning become more common and more powerful, it is essential that our students are freed from unnecessary controls that inhibit, rather than promote learning.

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