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TRAINING EDUCATORS FOR THIS BRAVE NEW WORLD

| By Ron Kordyban and Shelley Kinash |

As the saying goes, doctors make the worst patients. Can a similar comparison be made to teachers being less than ideal students when it comes to changing how they teach and/or accommodating new technologies and approaches? Perhaps such a sweeping general statement would be overly harsh, but in the context of learning about harnessing technology to enhance learning, it seems that some teachers are hesitant or resistant for improvement in this area.

The Need for Enhanced Teacher Training in Educational Technology

A number of recent publications indicate that education technology training is both important and being neglected. In a chapter titled Rethinking the Roles of Teachers in the K-12 Edition of the Horizon Report, the authors point to the growing need for teachers to be better trained and prepared for techology-based learning realities.

In the higher education context, the Higher Education Edition of the same 2014 report flagged the low digital fleuency of faculty as a significant challenge impedeing higher education technology adoption. Likewise, in January 2015, EduCause released its list of the top IT issues. In the top position was the problem set of staff training, retainment and hiring. Clearly there is a pressing need to train teaching professionals for the brave new educational world.

As the educational landscape continues its incredible transformation triggered by the digital educational revolution, teachers are being asked to do more and consequently learn more. Ongoing professional development is nothing new to educators who, for the most part, tend to be quite comfortable and supportive of lifelong learning. They are, after all, in the profession of learning and passionate about education.

But just as technology offers exciting new solutions and opportunities, it also demands growing competencies and skill sets to take advantage of these possibilities and to meet the increase in what is expected of teachers. The roles and responsibilities of becoming IT specialists are high-profile additions to the roles of the teacher, which also include educator, psychologist, coach, mediator, disciplinarian, assessor, event co-ordinator, nurse, role model, career adviser, tutor and a host of other duties.

Challenges

Change is unsettling and can provide many challenges. There are many obstacles to the timely and thorough training of teachers in the effective use of educational technology. The problems are exacerbated in that technology is rapidly changing and growing, constantly demanding updated knowledge and skills. The chart below outlines a few of these challenges and provides some tips for overcoming them for both teachers and managers.

Problem	Solutions for Educators	Solutions for Managers
Lack of Time Teachers are already busy and adding more to do is one of the main challenges to be overcome.	• Prioritise • Collaborate with others • Celebrate small steps • Identify problems and focus on action solutions	• Have realistic expectations • Communicate priorities • Allocate time for staff in lieu of other duties
Lack of Money Software and hardware updates can be expensive and education budgets are never large enough.	• Look at free and low-cost options • Use limited-time free trials • Consider open software	• Allocate funds where required • Consider trade-offs and balances • BYOD options/approaches
Ever-Changing Landscape In the world of educational technology, innovations come, go and evolve quickly. It is hard to prepare for something that is gone or changed tomorrow.	• Focus on general skills rather than specific products • Be agile and flexible • Be aware of and keep on top of changes • Know when updates/changes are not needed	• Set clear policies and schedules and abide by them • Facilitate open and clear communications among teachers and IT support • Be prepared for change and necessary chaos
Lack of Incentives Teachers sometimes feel that technology innovation is not recognised and some universities appear to recognise research outputs over teaching innovation.	• Become an advocate for change to help highlight the importance of excellence and innovation in teaching • Turn innovative teaching practice into research-based projects	• Remember to acknowledge and reward quality teaching and innovation in teaching • Balance the research/teaching equation when it comes time for employee reviews and promotions
Outside Their Comfort Zone As traditional subject matter experts, educators are used to being confident and comfortable in the class. When new technologies with steep learning curves are introduced, that confidence and control can be eroded.	• Take small steps and make incremental changes • Allocate enough time for planning and preparation • Have a plan B, just in case things do not go as expected • Celebrate failure learning (learning from one's mistakes)	• Allocate the time for staff to try new approaches and get out of their comfort zone • Send the message that thinking outside the box is encouraged rather than teaching the same way • Make time for conversations about new experiences
Personal Resources Obsolescence Over many years of teaching, educators create a library of various resources, such as printed materials and presentation slides. Changing to new media and tools can render these obsolete.	• Consider tools that can utilise existing materials – for example, convert PowerPoint slides into videos • Instead of discarding materials, offer a variety of types of resources (multiple means of representation) to appeal to different kinds of learners	• Lead by example and show how to bravely embrace new tools • Acknowledge efforts by staff to create new resources • Provide archival options for older but still relevant resources of others
Risk of Failure Trying new things inherently involves a risk of failure. Some students also dislike and resist change, which can be reflected in feedback on their teacher.	• Accept that when trying something for the first time it may not be as smooth or easy compared to practised approaches • Enjoy the freshness and energy of trying and learning new approaches	• Communicate to teachers that it is okay to fail when trying new approaches; the important aspect is learning from experiences for continuous improvement • Make allowances on teacher evaluations for innovation and risk taking

The Effective Use of Sharing and Showcasing

Experience shows that an efficacious way to encourage and support educators in adopting new technologies and tools to enhance student learning is to showcase others who are already doing it. Whether this is work colleagues from across the hall or documented examples from afar, sometimes seeing is believing. There is

Students can also help each other try new things, and this collaboration and peer instruction can be powerful, both in terms of motivation and results. Whereas students may require instruction to make the most of education technology, they are often resident experts on social media. Teachers who are open to learning from

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an empowering difference between showing what is being done and talking about possibilities.

It is important to strategically include various types of models, particularly in regards to the level of experience. Some educators are inspired by high-end or high-tech innovators who have made a major change to student learning and teaching approaches. For example, these educators might demonstrate software they have designed or virtual reality simulations of curricular content. Other educators will find these showcases intimidating and may, as a consequence, be reluctant to attempt change. Therefore it is important to also showcase changes made by people who self-present themselves as ludites or techno-jinxes. Watching someone who was reluctant to use technology demonstrate how to embed a YouTube video in a PowerPoint presentation can inspire others to attempt small changes in their own teaching repertoire.

In addition to the in-the-trenches credibility, showcasing and sharing helps to establish networks, partners and mentors for educators and students. For example, if an educator is thinking about changing an assignment from an essay to a student podcast, it would work for him to ask Mrs Ridley from across the hall how she did it and share ideas and experiences over coffee in the staff room.

their students can speed up technology adoption and innovation. If teachers, for example, are toying with the idea of using an online student poll instead of a multiple choice test, they can consult their students and/or jump online and see who has done it and what worked well and what could be improved. Educators tend to be social and generous by nature. Networking and collaborating can be great ways to expand social circles and try new things at the same time.

Conclusion

Learning is an ongoing and lifelong process; a never-ending quest for everyone, including, perhaps especially, teachers. In the area of educational technology, the quantum leaps of change and development mean that new tools and possibilities are always emerging. Instead of being overwhelmed or discouraged, educators are encouraged to embrace the energy and excitement of this new digital educational frontier. ⓔⓣⓢ

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