

Teaching with Technology at the University of Illinois: PT3 project exemplars and more

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ABSTRACT

New technology provides us with new tools for teaching and learning. In particular, computers, and the internet provide a dizzying array of choices...from text to digital video to Java. Learning these new technologies is a challenge, but the greater challenge is learning to use these technologies to teach. Can we use new technologies to teach more effectively? Can new technologies enable us to reach underserved populations? How do we evaluate implementations of new technologies in teaching and learning? We tackle these questions with actual teaching with technology examples from our PT3 project (Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology – funded by the US Department of Education) and other projects at our university.

What do we mean by using technology to teach rather than simply teaching technology? The online environment can lure one into glitzy implementations like streaming video, Flash and Java and the avoidance of text which may appear “old fashioned” or “un-motivating.” However, glitz does not necessarily guarantee good teaching. Teaching with technology is more an issue of how to teach with technology rather than using the most sophisticated technologies. For example, text can mean a lot of different things. Syllabi, lectures, email messages, discussion posts and journals can all be text. In a discussion board like WebBoard, read-only “conferences” can be used to post announcements, Syllabus, lectures, etc. In this manner, we transmit information one-way (e.g., teacher to student). Note that we also do it “asynchronously” – the teacher and student (or student and other students) do not have to be logged in simultaneously. Simultaneous online text communication is usually something we call “chat.” Private conferences can be set up in a discussion board so that students can post assignments (which only s/he and the instructor can see). Threaded discussion (or conferencing) is often implemented in the online environment as the (asynchronous) virtual equivalent of in-class discussion. The features of threaded discussions enable students and teacher to participate anytime, anywhere. Discussions are also automatically documented for future reference and/or evaluation. Selection of topics and focus is controlled by the teacher or discussion board manager (who can surrender that control to selected students as desired). Use of text in the online environment can be as simple as a conferencing tool, or as advanced as a course management system, such as Blackboard, WebCT, or eCollege. These provide tools for teaching and learning activities like uploading course content, conducting asynchronous and synchronous communications, administering quizzes, evaluating students – usually implemented predominantly in text. It is how we use text that's important. In fact, the issues are similar for the seemingly more sophisticated technologies like streaming video, Flash and Java. For each of these, it is how the technology is used rather than the technology itself that results in instructionally sound, even innovative, online instruction.

Many teachers use technology, but we need to make technology an integral part of the curriculum. We need to define what technology is and how to incorporate technology into best teaching practices. We attempt to provide our university faculty and pre-service teachers with the support they need in using technology *to teach*. It is far more challenging to learn how to teach with technology rather than to teach technology. In this presentation, we demonstrate how our faculty use technology to teach at the University of Illinois.