Going Retro:
Teaching "Techless"

Teaching in higher education is reaching a point where the "WOW level" of the technology and the entertainment value of the class are often key variables in determining the effectiveness of teaching. This phenomenon has created some good news and some bad news:

The Good News:

- Instructional experiences that include technological applications align well with the learning preferences of millennial students (often referred to as "digital natives" based upon their lifelong connections with technology).
- The range of technological tools available to faculty is growing every day (e.g., wikis, blogs, electronic classroom management systems, podcasts).
- It is actually possible to have an entirely paperless semester.
- Access to most current information in our academic disciplines is literally at our fingertips.
- We can not even imagine the developments in technology that are in our future and the ways in which these innovations will revolutionize learning on college campuses.

The Bad News:

- "The projector doesn't work" is considered to be a valid reason for a professor to cancel class.
- Teaching sometimes (or maybe often) is reduced to a faculty read-aloud of the PowerPoint bullet points.
- There is a wide and ever-growing range of skills/abilities among faculty in relation to the effective use of technology.
- For students, the excuse that "my computer crashed" or "the Internet was down" is the newest version of "the dog ate my homework" excuse for not having an assignment completed in a timely manner.
- Cell phones, Facebook, and texting often complete with faculty for the attention of students in the classroom.

Before we go any further, and for fear of being labeled a "Luddite" (i.e., a group of workers in 17th century England who destroyed machinery in the belief that it reduce employment opportunities), please allow me to emphasize that I am totally supportive of technology in the classroom—technology that is relevant, enhances the teaching of faculty, and assists students in learning. At the same time, however, I am opposed to technology simply for the sake of using technology. While I am making confessions, let me make two more: (1) I have made fun of people who still use overhead transparencies, created in the early 80s, that were hardly readable on the day they were made, and feature a 12-point font, and (2) My usual process for preparing a lesson is to

- Think about the big picture and the main points that I want to convey to the students
- Begin feverishly preparing clever, colorful, action-packed PowerPoint slides
- Look on YouTube for several videos that are funny, poignant, and somewhat related to the topic of the day
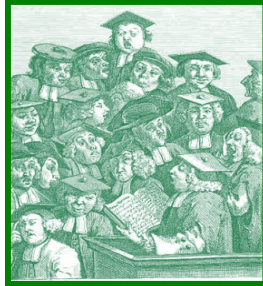- Teach

Which as you can see clearly puts form before function—another of my many flaws. I feel better now.

Going retro

Some Thoughts on Planning a Retro Teaching Day

1. Fight the fear: you can do this!
2. Think of techless teaching as a change of pace in the ordinary routines of the semester.
3. Planning becomes a key variable in making techless teaching a success. It will not necessarily take more time, but it will require you to take a different point-of-view as you conceptualize the class time that is available to you.
4. Techless should also mean that you will "talk less." One of the goals of this process is to engage students in conversations that feature their observations, insights, and uncertainties—not your ideas, favorite theorists, and areas of personal research. Your role, in this venue, is to pose questions, create platforms for student response, and then insert the missing pieces and summarize the learning that has taken place.
5. Make a list of the learning outcomes for your time with the students and then generate a list of questions and scenarios for discussion.
6. Organize students into a circle.
7. Carefully craft your questions in a way that invites comments and differences of opinion. You might think of yourself as a composer who is charged with prompting the contributions of various members of the orchestra.
8. Think of your students as valuable resources and the group process as the energy that will provide the momentum for your conversations.
9. Do not be afraid of silence. It is a powerful motivator. If you ask a question and no one answers, wait out the group. The silence will seem longer to them than it does to you. Discipline yourself to wait for responses to your prompts and questions.
10. Make retro an intentional part of your teaching.

The ToolBox

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Read and Speak

Quite often, the value and quality of the conversations that take place in the classroom are directly proportional to the level at which the participants are prepared and knowledgeable. In most classrooms, it seems to be common knowledge (yet seldom discussed) that students come to class without reading the assigned text —if they in fact own it—and have faith that they can make it through a one-hour class by either: (a) Avoiding eye contact with the professor, (b) Relying on their wits to create a relevant comment that won't blow their cover, (c) Ask questions that encourage the professor to pontificate, or (d) All of the above. As a former "nonreader" and aspiring nonparticipant, I have seen each of these techniques work magic as the clock ticks away ever so slowly.

Consider the "Read and Speak" technique as an antidote to this ever so common classroom phenomenon. This strategy unfolds in the following way:

- Students are assigned readings for the class session (that may also include guiding questions to assist their reading and lubricate the discussion process).
- At the beginning of each class, students are asked to sign a statement indicating that they have read the assigned materials for the day.
- You may even be so bold as to require that they bring their book to class and quote from the text in support of their responses
- Students who do not or can not honestly sign the "Read and Speak" pledge, are prohibited from contributing from the conversation for that class period. A good deal, you might say. However, in addition to not being able to participate, these students also lose participation points for that class session.
- This process sends a clear message that you take seriously both the need to prepare for class (i.e., completing the assigned reading) and the need to speak from an informed position rather than espousing opinions based on little more than a personal feeling and a need to impress the professor.
- I have seen this work magic. Give it a try.

A Different Perspective Required

Remember—in the techless environment, your most important teaching tools are your ears and eyes. Listen to what your students are saying and identify the threads that connect the conversations with the "big ideas" that you had in mind as the focus of the classroom learning experience.