Evolution of My Technology

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Keywords: personal journey, technology, online education

After thirty-seven years of teaching, I realize I still have a great deal to learn about the use of technology in education. My name is Helena Flores; I am a nurse and an educator. Being an older teacher, most of my teaching experience has been in the face to face classroom setting. During the past eight years, I have transitioned into online education. I would like to share my journey from my initial fear of technology to my current increasing confidence to better engage students through the use of technology. Am I there yet? No, but I am on my way.

As an older nurse and educator, I am familiar with the classroom environment and have always enjoyed face to face interactions between myself and the students. I find a sense of accomplishment when you see a student grasp a difficult concept or demonstrate excitement in learning something new. That is one reason I continued teaching for over thirty years in the classroom and clinical setting. I believe that an essential part of educating students is modeling new behaviors through the use of teacher-student interactions in the classroom. Could this be accomplished in the online setting?

Throughout my teaching, I developed technology skills by inputting grades into the computer, using simulations, power points, and projectors. I improved my communication outside the classroom with students and faculty through the use of Imessaging, email, and texting. Although these skills were foreign to me initially, integrating them within a familiar environment was much less intimidating. As online education grew, I thought about the possibility of teaching online.

After many years of teaching, I decided to retire and try the online educational setting. However, I wondered if there would still be opportunities for developing relationships with students and seeing the growth in their abilities and thinking that was apparent in the classroom setting. I knew this would be a risk for me due to the increased need for technology in an online program. I was already familiar with using a learning management system but assumed online teaching would require more advanced technology skills.

My first exposure to online teaching came in a nursing program where I facilitated learning by participating in discussion boards and providing feedback on written assignments. There were pros and cons to the asynchronous learning environment. It offered the opportunity to compose a thoughtful response to discussion prompts but did not provide real-time interactions. The online environment allowed me to evaluate the students' critical thinking skills but did not allow for immediate feedback to prompts that encouraged deeper thinking. I realized
that an emphasis on the student-teacher relationship and social presence was even more essential in online education.

If I were going to achieve social presence in the online classroom, I would need to step out of my comfort level by trying new technology within the LMS. I needed to conquer my fears about the use of technology to increase my connection with students. I was not born into an era of technology, as a sixty-two-year-old educator. When hospitals first introduced computer-based care and data collection in the 90s, many nurses resigned as opposed to learning new technology. As a younger nurse educator, I was open to the new learning management system used in education and the use of computers for providing patient care.

Determined to raise my awareness of new technology and its use in the online environment, I decided to attend a conference called, Magna Teaching with Technology. There, I was introduced to a language that was unfamiliar to me. The conference leaders used terms such as Voxer, Flipgrid, Memes, and Remind. My purpose in attending the conference was to learn about new technology and how I could assimilate it into my online classes to increase student engagement. According to one of the speakers, research shows that students view their success, in even the most demanding courses, on their interactions and relationships with their teachers. (Magna Teaching Conference, 2017)

Initially, I was intimidated. Looking around the conference I saw many young people who seemed more tech-savvy than I. Then I found two comrades, who were equally lost, and I thought to myself I am not alone in my struggle. I then decided to face my fears and attempt to try some of the apps and strategies that were presented by the speakers. The passion they exhibited for these new tech tools was contagious. Using these new approaches to create a connection and presence in online classes seemed valuable, and I was willing to step out of my comfort zone if it meant helping students achieve success.

Since attending the conference, I plan to work toward creating a more engaging learning environment by the addition of new technology to improve connections with the students. Studies have found that student-teacher relationships and engagement enhance student outcomes and success. (Magna Teaching Conference, 2017) Techniques that I plan to use in my upcoming course are Voxer, Remind, and Flipgrid. I plan to implement Voxer by providing an audio/visual introduction to myself and the students during the first week of the course. The students will be able to view their peers' introduction. Flipgrid will make it possible to engage students in discussions about current news, extend weekly talks outside of the online classroom, and share articles or videos that relate to the weekly content. Using Remind, I can send out information about upcoming assignments and quizzes. According to the Remind website, homework completion rates increase by 50%, and absenteeism decreases with these small nudges.

Ali Briggs (2015) writes in a Blog at the College of William and Mary website that student contacts should be made before the course begins to improve student engagement and reduce social barriers that can sometimes occur in online learning. This communication can be accomplished by sending out a personalized short video so students can get to know their teacher and start to make connections with their classmates. A video could help to reduce the sense of social isolation that students often feel in the online environment. Overcoming social barriers is
one of the obstacles identified in a Blog by Briggs. Voxer would be a great way to increase the
teachers’ presence even before the course begins.

I would not have had the courage to attempt these new techniques without observing the
conference leaders modeling the strategies and allowing myself adequate time to try them and
see the practical application. My confidence has grown in the use of technology in the online
classroom. However, I am still on the learning curve. I need to become more confident in my
abilities to incorporate them into my online classes. These new skills will develop with practice
and frequency of use of the latest technology.

Mentors play an important role for those of us older teachers who are trying to make the
transition to increased use of technology. A relationship with a mentor makes it easier to ask
questions that might seem embarrassing otherwise. Professional development training is also
helpful in assimilating technology into teaching practice. Tackling small goals is less
overwhelming when incorporating new technology in the classroom. Positive reinforcement
from peers and administrators encourages continued growth. I have been very fortunate over my
many years of teaching to have administrators that were positive, supportive, and encouraging.
Trying new approaches can feel risky, but having the support of peers, colleagues, and
administrators can reduce the anxiety that is often associated with adding technology to your
teaching strategy toolbox. Colleagues have asked me how I have been able to evolve into an
online educator. They are hesitant to try due to fear of failure, and I tell them that if I was able to
make the transition, then they could too. My journey as an educator continues!

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