

Altering the Pedagogy of Caribbean Teaching: Beyond the New “Chalk and Talk.”

Abstract

This paper attempts to assess the current trend of integrating the use of technology into the classrooms of tertiary level institutions like the University of the West Indies at St Augustine. This thrust has for example, seen the use of laptops, multimedia projectors and various other advanced paraphernalia becoming items of customary usage in the classroom. It notes, however, that while this move is generally laudable and has assisted in the effective conveyance of needed information to students, if used incorrectly it can be pedagogically flawed and easily lends itself to bad classroom practices and ineffective teaching. In delineating the aforementioned the paper also attempts to illustrate that in many circumstances instead of promoting and creating innovative and lively teaching and learning experiences, the use of technology has been concomitant with the rise of a new culture of “chalk and talk” in the classroom that is inimical to the requirements of effective teaching and learning at the tertiary level. It concludes by asserting for it to be truly meaningful the use of technology in the classroom must not be considered a “conceit” but instead must be seen as a necessary conduit of the wider well established practices of a student centred education.

Keywords

“Chalk and talk,” multimedia, pedagogy, technology.

Does the widespread introduction of new technology in the classroom setting of the UWI St Augustine Campus automatically lead to better teaching and learning?

Like many nations around the world Trinidad and Tobago stands at an interesting crossroad educationally. This nation, like most of its Caribbean siblings faces a brave new world and with it the potential pitfalls and remarkable opportunities inherent in periods of rapid adjustment. For example It is tremendously easy to scoff at notions of globalisation and the attendant effects it has on people irrespective of age, class, culture, educational attainment or any point of differentiation but it is an unavoidable reality that geography aside this planet is becoming a smaller and more transparent plain and information and ideas of many types that were once the purview of the few and the select are now more widely available than they have ever been in the history of the species. This age of enhanced information, is making a tremendously profound impact one of oldest relationships in human existence, that between teacher and student and in the wider context presents many new opportunities to institutions of learning, regardless of the level involved, that are simultaneously exciting and terrifying.

Mirroring the situation in the wider nation and region, the University of the West Indies also stands at the cusp of a period of interesting and dynamic adjustment. If one accepts the notion that intelligence, a la Gardener is a multi-dimensional and multi-tiered entity then perhaps the litmus test for its existence must be the ability to be introspective, and if that is the case the U.W.I. St. Augustine Campus as an institution has been displaying for some time a particularly interesting form of inward looking intelligence. This has been exemplified by the University's intent to ferment the development of an ideal U.W.I. graduate as part and parcel of the development plan contained in the University of the West Indies Strategic Plan 2012-2017.

Some might interpret this thrust as tacit acceptance that in the past the University has failed to produce that kind of well rounded, holistically developed students mandated by its charter and that this is a late effort to right a long established oversight. However a better evaluation must countenance that the era and the ethos of the nation, region and wider world demand students who are not only knowledgeable but also culturally astute critical thinkers and problem solvers, who simultaneously possess the skills and acumen demanded by a rapidly transforming global and globalised situation. Any and all of these constitute big tasks that require a number of organisational and structural adjustments on the part of institution. However the crux of the issue has been and will remain not why, but how to effect these changes and create the ideal U.W.I. graduate who possesses all of the required attributes. Answers to these must be found not solely at the planning or administrative levels but also in the classrooms. As society's incubators they stand as both the biggest problems and the places for definitive solutions.

Interestingly at the U.W.I. these imperatives have demanded a multi-sectored and multilateral approach; however where the issue of teaching and learning have been concerned the work of one unit has been brought starkly into focus. The one time Instructional Development Unit, (I.D.U.) now rebranded as the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (C.E.T.L.) allied with other critical stakeholders (like the University's School of Education) has been at the vanguard of the thrust to establish a student centred strategic plan for the University on one hand and then conversely the move to facilitate better teaching and learning practices in the classrooms of the institution. The end result has been a quiet but ongoing campus revolution.

If one implication stands out more than any other about C.E.T.L. overarching educational philosophy it is that the use of modern technology must form an integral part of the everyday teaching and learning process. It remains the leitmotiv of much of what the Unit does. From its

insistence on the use of new modes of teaching and learning like the Blended Learning Model, to its provision of training in all manners and modes of the use of technological hardware and software in the classroom both in the instructional phase and as resource material, it is not difficult to discern a common thread in the *modus operandi* involved therein. The hard work of this Unit and some others and arguably the *zeitgeist* of the times has transformed the classrooms of the U.W.I. St. Augustine campus. It is difficult to track the changes involved statistically, but one clearly gets the sense now that the use of modern technological paraphernalia such as computers, projectors, tablets et al, and popular software such as Microsoft Power Point and teaching and learning methods consistent with their utilisation have become ubiquitous throughout the campus. This is a remarkable transformation especially considering the wider educational culture wherein many teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, even at the Secondary level still express great trepidation and discomfort at utilising hardware and software in the classroom.

This is an issue that needs to be understood within its broader historical context. The use of what today constitutes modern technology in the classroom is neither a new nor unique phenomenon. In fact it can be argued that the utilisation of whatever technology was readily available has always been central to the art and craft of teaching and learning whether formally or informally. Pre-literate societies used a mechanism called the oral tradition within which special individuals were selected to become living repositories of knowledge, the whole body of which would be passed on by the spoken word from generation to generation. The technology used here was inbuilt, the human brain. Later the development of writing meant that this older mechanism would be supplanted and some rudimentary form of chalk and slate would take its place, regardless of whether that slate was small and hand held or a massive edifice. Eventually

the creation of the printing press by Johannes Guttenberg meant that in ways that were hitherto unthinkable printed materials as opposed to hand written ones would dominate the classroom.

In Trinidad and Tobago in the classrooms of the not too distant past the use of blackboards and chalk once constituted the most cutting edge technology available to teachers, later to be replaced by the even more malleable whiteboard and marker. Today one finds in classrooms at all levels, from primary to tertiary, teachers using laptops, tablets, projectors and complicated software et al. However without being too much of a Luddite the real question remains however whether these changes have made an important impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. One can legitimately question whether the use of all of this paraphernalia makes teaching and learning a more interactive and interesting experience for students. Has the apparent technology revolution contributed to a better classroom experience?

It is difficult to answer this question in the absence of widespread statistical research but one gets the sense that, especially at the U.W.I. that this is not always the case. This is primarily because of a fallacious mode of teaching called “chalk and talk.” This well-known term of course refers to a traditional and uncritical style of instruction that the old teachers colleges in Trinidad and Tobago systematically tried to drum out of prospective teachers. Its numerous faults lay in the fact that it was teacher centred, as opposed to student oriented, did not promote classroom interaction, failed to encourage student participation, did not effectively utilise the art of questioning, and it was at times relentlessly and painfully boring for teachers as well as students.

It might seem incongruous to deliberate an issue as mundane as chalk and talk in a discussion which is simultaneously examining the use of technology in the classrooms of U.W.I. However it can be argued that there is an intersection between the existence of the former and the application of the latter. For example the question can be asked: Is there a difference between

a lecturer or a teacher who does little more than read a prepared lecture in class and one who brings a Power Point presentation to the classroom that the students are allowed to read and make notes from? A critical response must assert that important dissimilarities exist herein but also that they are not fundamental. Both of these are really examples of chalk and talk in the broader sense of the term and both are inimical to the widely accepted best practices associated with teaching and learning. Furthermore both modes run counter to the broader expectations of the University especially where the dictums of the U.W.I. Strategic Plan are concerned.

Educational theorists abound from Piaget, to Bruner to Zoltan Dienes and sundry others who have underscored the fact that students learn best when allowed to actively participate in the formation of educational experiences. It is simply not enough to provide them with the information germane to their education; the mode in which they are allowed to interact with it is arguably just as significant, if not more so. Thus the central point of this discourse is not to make a case against the use of technology in the classroom. Instead it is to point out that the tenets of good teaching and learning transcend the simple use of a laptop, or projector or any software. The provision of feedback, effective questioning, hands on experiences, on point evaluations, the prudent selection of material and many others have made up the backbone of good teaching for millennia. What has changed have been the methodology utilised to bring them across to students. The use of technology is merely a method; it is a how, and neither a what nor a why.

There is certainly a larger cultural discourse involved in all of this. It is centred on what can be quixotically termed an ethos of non-transformational transformations in education in Trinidad and Tobago. It mandates that in this nation billions of dollars are spent and epochal changes are seemingly made, Common Entrance is replaced by the S.E.A. exam, National Testing is instituted to diagnose the weaknesses of students, teachers at all levels are now widely

encouraged to get tertiary level degrees, modern schools are built, but the backward, neo-colonial education system that has been bequeathed to us by a history of foreign domination remains resolutely unchanged. This is an observable, yet paradoxical condition that must be addressed if this nation ever wishes to reap the full reward of its massive annual investments in education.

In the end there is absolutely nothing wrong with the utilisation of the latest technology in the classrooms of the U.W.I. St Augustine, or anywhere else for that matter, It is a fallacy however to use it as a crutch, or to believe that it singularly forms the basis of good teaching and learning. The use of technology is a methodology. It cannot compensate for poor or inadequate questioning, feedback, evaluation and course material et al. Bad teaching with the use of technology is no better than bad teaching without it. The results are the same, bored and uninterested students.