Giving Technology a Try

[Dr. Sébastien Dubreil]

I’ve been using technology in the classroom for about 17 years, and it seems like an increasing rate over the past 15 and now it’s just pretty heavy. OIT has helped me a lot with technology from my very first year at UT. First of all I went to a lot of the OIT Open Doors and being in those conversations you hear what people do, the way they think about using technology in the classrooms, and the way the problem solve, and so on and so forth. And so if nothing else “Just being in the mix” of knowing people who are like minded or at least also have an interest in technology enhanced teaching is in and of itself a great service. Now I was fortunate enough to receive a Project Rite grant my first year here, that enabled me to buy equipment so that I could do the Tele-collaboration between UT students and French students, in France. So that was very helpful and there was also some interest in the way things were working, so I had some more IT people who came to see how this was working and to help with setting up the system and everything so that was good.

More recently, I was fortunate enough to receive a Faculty First grant for the development of hybrid courses for the French language program. So a bit further from what I do day to day in the classroom however it really helped me. OIT contributed money, they contributed expertise, they provided guidance into you know maybe you should prefer this design over that design, and these other pros and cons, this layout vs. that layout and so on and so forth. And they also contributed labor I mean either themselves or their student, work students in developing materials and things like this. So I’d say overall I’ve run a pretty wide gambit of services provided by OIT. And fortunately or successfully so.

The reason why the new ERC has enabled me to even look at my practices in a new light is because I feel like in a space like this, that is designed from the get go for language instruction, and in particular for what we call Technology enhanced language teaching, is that I can combine here, teaching per say research and my duties as the language prime director of the French program. There is a plethora of toys here that really invite you to see what you can do in the classroom differently from what you were doing before, and for what purpose? Is it going to be effective? So as we were designing this space and we were talking about it. Especially with the hybrid courses looming on the horizon I was like, How can we design this, that will maximize the effectiveness of what students can do? As far as teaching I use everything if you look at the Tele-classroom that has maybe the most versatile space. I use everything from the whiteboard to the little whiteboard on wheels so that students can collaborate when they do group work, they have mobile furniture, they have mobile chairs, mobile computers and so they can wheel around. I use the physical mobility of the space to enhance teaching. but also use they have computers at their disposal. And so The other day they were debating when women got the right to vote in the US and check it out we have 20 computers in the classroom. Check it out! And now they understand this is part of the learning environment. And now then it’s questions about fact, they don’t wait for me to answer their question, they go and they’re constantly on Google they are constantly on everything just trying to find answers, fact check. The class is not about facts it’s about problem solving, it’s about analysis and so on and so forth. And also of course I use the computers, they’re all equipped with webcams and headsets and so we still do the tele-collaboration with the class in France. This year we’re using Skype, which is pretty easy. And a whole slew of collaborative tools like blogs, Google Docs, and things like this. So and all this is available in the classroom in real time, all the time in addition to this now on the research side of things I film every single one of my classes there is a lecture capture system going on, which allows me to do two things, One it allows me to do self-evaluation I can go back to this I can look at it, what did I do well what did I not do well. Can I use the space better? And it also allows me to see what kind of interactions are going on in the classroom. So in terms of my own scholarly work, I get excerpts of what students are saying, the way they are envisioning the issues and so on and so forth. And do research on tele-collaborative settings, I’ll also have a sense of what is going on in the classroom as people are talking to each other, because as you know
when we are doing a webcam session the session is framed, by the computer so what I see is a little snippet of my partner from here to here. It’s about this wide, but they don’t see the rest of the environment. I can account for this with this lecture capture so when I talk about the kinds of interactions and dynamics that are going on in tele-collaborative settings I actually have access to that information. That I’d say is the greatest advantage and you know major upside of this facility, is this it brings together research, teaching and service, for me. And that has been really invaluable to be able to teach in such a space.

Advise for faculty, you know, who are contemplating using technology in the classroom I’d say before going into the technicalities, be aware of the time commitment. It will never go as fast as you think it will. And it is not a bad thing. It is not a bad thing. Sometimes I think by slowing down and having to confront the difficulties and obstacles and just reconceptualization and work that has to go on with implementing new kinds of technological practices, and new kinds of tools. It forces you to question what it is that you really want to do. So that’s one thing, it will take time, at least initially the time commitment will be somewhat large, it doesn’t have to be but it probably will be.

Two, do not lose sight of your objectives. If you are thinking of a new tool, you better have new ideas of that you want to do in a classroom as a teacher, what is the role of your students are going to be, and what you are going to be able to do differently, after, and hopefully better than you were able to do before. And to stay with the transparency example. If you want to deploy your content in a way that allows your students to muse through in a non-linear fashion, use Prezi and you will be able to navigate back and forth between the different contents. They will be able to make connections between the different parts of you content and appropriate the content to themselves in a way that makes sense to them. SO in that sense maybe yea you can enhance their interaction with the content and their learning. So be mindful of this, your objective, your pedagogical practices, your kinds of outcomes you wish your students to produce. What will you be able to do in the classroom with the technology that will add value? That will add a different kind of value, and where you and your students are going to construct that value together. So in the case of the Tele-collaboration, my students are able to talk to France every week. In fact, I know for a fact that they are communicating outside the classroom. Because first thing they do “what is your Facebook page. What is your IM login” whatever, and they chat, they text, and I already get some feedback a month into this and they already tell me that they probably spend more time talking to their partners outside of class than they do in class. That, to me, is a big return on a small investment. 50 minutes or an hour every week, talking to France as part of your classes generates 3 to 4 hours of intercultural communication outside of class, and that’s just something they cannot find elsewhere.

But here they have something that is part of a class that they can extend, outside of the class, where they will actually investigate some, they have a purpose for this communication to happen, and they do it and apparently derive great pleasure from it, because I get feedback all the time, you know of people talking marriage proposals, not sure it’s going to happen but you know. That’s how deep it can go. It’s the honeymoon phase you know like 6 weeks from now I’ll be like “I don’t like my partner anymore” but anyway. That’s what I’d encourage people to do, pause and think before you do it at all levels.