Doing What I Don't Know How to Do

Leveraging a faculty learning community has helped me do things I didn't know how to do with technology, including podcasting my lectures

By **R. Martin Reardon**

Painter and sculptor Eduardo Chillida claimed "I'm always trying to do what I don't know how to do," according to author Stanley Meisler.[1] Chillida continually set new goals for himself in coming to terms with new media. I feel the same way.

When I first read Chillida's statement, I was beginning my second career, moving from high school teaching and administration to an assistant professorship teaching graduate students about educational leadership. My new career presented me with new challenges, many of them related to tasks I had set for myself involving digital technologies. I was determined to create my own website, for example, and was wrestling mightily to understand what Marc Prensky's "digital natives" might regard as common knowledge.[2] I wanted to incorporate digital video segments of practice into my teaching, and I was frustrated by the intricacies of software that seemed to be written in an incomprehensible language. Successfully taking on projects involving technology that I know can be done easily by people more skilled than I depends on my finding and benefiting from appropriate support. Luckily, I found it.

Joining a Focused Faculty Learning Community

In moving to my current institution, I had the opportunity to join a newly formed faculty learning community (FLC) focused on integrating technology with teaching and sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). Despite having a general idea of how an FLC might operate and participating in many collaborative ventures, I had never been engaged with a formal, longer-term group. My new FLC colleagues, who came from the many departments and schools across our large research institution, brought a wide range of perspectives. They shared my generic understanding of an FLC—that is, a group of faculty working together on an issue. It turned out to be much more involved, however, calling to mind Michael Fullan's laconic assessment that the "learning community" title "travels faster and better than the concept."[3]

Meeting Structure

In the FLC's initial meetings, ably led by a facilitator with expertise in applications of digital technology in education, we set about defining our community in practice. What emerged was

- A commitment to a meeting schedule (we would meet every second week through the fall and spring)
- A projected learning curve (we would spend the fall learning about a range of Internet tools and related digital technologies)
- An individual task requirement (we would each seek to incorporate one or more of the technologies we learned about through fall into our teaching in the spring semester)
- A group project requirement (we would agree on a large-scale

group project with which we could all engage towards the end of the spring semester)

Members also agreed that the FLC's experience would form the substance of a proposal to an appropriate conference in the spring, with FLC members determining their individual ability to attend should the proposal be accepted.

In return for the FLC members' time commitment, and to ensure that good ideas did not languish for lack of seed money, the CTE set aside a stipend of $1,000 per FLC member to defray the costs of hardware or software needed to complete the individual tasks we set ourselves. Part of the stipend could be accessed during the year, with the balance available at the end of the year.

Process

All of this planning took time, of course, and my individual project turned out to be a major undertaking. Hours of discussion with my FLC colleagues preceded my decision about what I would attempt to do. Hours more were required to address the many questions that I asked and even re-asked in the supportive environment of the FLC.

After much deliberation, I chose to create podcasts of my discussions of the PowerPoint slides I have created over a number of years to summarize the course content. These would enable students to access the material ahead of the class meetings. My intention was to carve out more time in class for simulations and role-playing, thus engaging students with the performance-related skills I hoped to engender in them. Implementing this new approach was easier said than done, unfortunately.

First, I did not own an iPod, thinking of them as entertainment toys. Encouraged by the FLC discussions, however, I saw a role for iPod technology in enhancing teaching and learning, and part of my stipend went to purchasing one.

Next, the facilitator introduced me to an online service (http://www .lecture123.com) suited to my purpose and arranged for me to try it out. It worked well in two trial situations late

in the fall, but the cost once the trial had expired seemed prohibitive. The facilitator then arranged for me to access stand-alone software (Camtasia Studio from TechSmith, http://www.tech smith.com/camtasia.asp) with which I produced the podcasts I envisioned. Although still on the learning curve for using the software, I can nonchalantly don an audio-active headset, produce a podcast, and make the podcast available on my website.

Personal Value of the FLC

Both the community involvement and the meeting structure of the FLC suited my needs. The wide range of perspectives my colleagues brought to our discussions expanded my understanding of potential applications. The structure, as it emerged, also fueled my learning. By having set times committed to group sharing, along with financial support for technology, FLC members were able to meet our individual and group goals.

Even more than the structure, however, the FLC's leadership was key to its success. The practitioner who facilitated the meetings was highly competent, extremely patient, and dedicated to providing whatever resources we required to get the most out of the entire experience. On the rare occasions when I could not attend a particular meeting, I was able to call on his time for an update or access the online material he continually supplied on the university's course management site. Further, when I decided on my individual project, the facilitator made me aware of options, made it possible for me to try them out, and ensured that I had the software I needed for my project.

Conclusion

The CTE-sponsored FLC at my university has provided the support and resources needed for me to make a major change in the way I deal with content in my course. This has resulted in offering a different learning modality to my students.

I continue to monitor and improve the usefulness of my podcasts by gathering student feedback and making adjust-

ments. For example, almost one year out from my initial implementation of the concept, the purpose of the original podcasting exercise has changed—it has evolved to become a tool that allows students to review my class discussions at their leisure. Assuming students would use the podcasts before coming to class didn't work out as I expected, but the unanticipated post-class use benefits them in a different way.

A backhanded compliment to the podcasts' usefulness occurred in a recent class when I heard my voice emanating from a student's laptop. The student had unintentionally opened my preceding podcast while the live event was in progress!

Use of an iPod has furthered my own learning in new ways as well. These days, I listen to language lessons on my way to work and thus know considerably more Spanish than I did previously.

Participating in the FLC has shown me how to implement projects involving technology in my teaching approach, with clear benefits for students. It has also provided an enjoyable way to meet and discuss pedagogy with colleagues from across campus. Perhaps the clearest endorsement I can offer of the FLC is this: I chose to continue my membership for the current year as I continue "to do what I don't know how to do." *e*

Endnotes

1. Stanley Meisler, "The Poetic Vision of Spanish Sculptor Eduardo Chillida," *Smithsonian Magazine*, vol. 31, no. 4 (July 2000), pp. 56–63, http://www .stanleymeisler.com/smithsonian/smith sonian-2000-07-chillida.html.

2. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part II: Do They Really Think Differently?" *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 6 (December 2001), pp. 1–9, http:// www.marcprensky.com/.

3. Michael Fullan, "Leading Professional Learning," *School Administrator*, vol. 63, no. 10 (November 2006), pp. 10–14, http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa articledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=7565.

R. Martin Reardon (mreardon@vcu.edu) is Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership Department, in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.