Fostering Human Connection for Meaningful Learning in Technologically Advanced Learning Spaces

The EDUCAUSE community is reimagining the very essence of higher education: what it looks like, how it’s designed, who it’s for. A major focus of this reimagining is to integrate new technological tools into our learning spaces. From immersive technology to mobile displays and digital devices and even to furniture and writable surfaces, every aspect of the classroom is under scrutiny. Everything is being upgraded to the “Classroom 2.0” experience. As we engage in this level of innovation, it is easy (and fun) to get excited about educational technology. But it is also important to balance this excitement with a sprinkle of caution: essential elements of teaching and learning might be easily overlooked in a technology-focused environment. Furthermore, as technological tools take on new roles in classrooms, people’s roles will almost certainly shift. If we do not attend to this shift with intentionality, we risk watching professors and students lose opportunities to engage in teaching and learning in meaningful ways. To this end, we must consider how to promote the affective elements of meaningful learning and how to foster them in technologically advanced learning spaces.

Meaningful Learning (and Teaching Too)

Joseph Novak, in his theory of meaningful learning, posits that learners have to make an affective commitment to learning in order for “meaningful” (versus “rote”) learning to occur. Furthermore, he asserts that human feelings are tied to the construction of new knowledge and that human empowerment underlies meaningful learning. Professors also need to feel an emotional connection—not only for the sake of enjoying their work but also for the reason that authentic human connection is a two-way street and students are smart enough to know when “connection” is being manufactured.

In my own research, a tenured science professor (pseudonym “Jackson”) at a large research-intensive university described the essential role of human connection in his classroom. In fact, Jackson learned how valuable this connection was as he developed his teaching skills over time. At first, he attempted to take on an austere façade in his classroom: “I tried to mimic what I had seen some of my past instructors do. . . . I could tell I was alienating a decent portion of my class through those interactions.” Eventually, Jackson began to open himself up to more meaningful connections with his students. He describes his classroom now as a “team” environment of “mutual respect.” He is happier, and his students are “willing to try harder” as a result of his revised teaching strategies.

Keeping the importance of human connection in mind, consider the changing landscape of technologically advanced learning spaces. Technology adds excitement and increases the teaching capacity of learning spaces in many ways, but these changes might also present challenges for the formation of human connection.

New Opportunities for Professional Development

By necessity, classroom priorities are constantly changing to meet the needs of professors, students, and other stakeholders. But the primary purpose of higher education—to teach students—has never been up for debate, and human connection is an essential element of the teaching and learning process. We will best serve our students by preemptively troubleshooting the new challenges that arise for faculty working to develop human connection in technologically advanced spaces. Faculty and students are supported by communities of instructional designers, educational developers, education researchers, and more. There is now an opportunity for an entirely new form of professional development—one that addresses reimagining the roles of teachers in these spaces. We know that meaningful professional development should be job-embedded, ongoing, and co-constructed. We know that we must work with faculty to understand their (and their students’) needs in our rapidly changing spaces. Beyond this, however, there is much we don’t know. Please consider the following questions:

- As faculty and students engage with new educational technologies, their focus may shift away from interpersonal interaction and toward interaction with the technological tools. How can faculty and students take advantage of new tools without disrupting the communication that supports meaningful human connection?
- Access to a wider variety of more advanced tools has increased the need for students to develop a novel skill:
Faculty are now tasked not only with teaching content knowledge and specific tool use but also with supporting digital fluency. How do faculty maintain a focus on students’ progress in learning disciplinary content and practices while also teaching tool use and digital fluency?

Finally, as faculty and students are discovering new ways of integrating educational technology into the classroom, support staff are simultaneously working to provide technological training. How do educational technology experts synchronously support the development of technological skills and human connection skills?

As we engage in conversations around these questions, we must maintain focus on our mission—to support the success of students at our institutions—without being distracted by secondary goals.

Higher education spaces are shifting dramatically. Technological tools are allowing us to support student learning in ways we never imagined. As educational technology becomes more prominent and even, occasionally, steals center stage, let us remember that educational technology does not replace human beings in learning environments; it complements them. Now is a time of great possibility, a time to harness the potential of educational technology and make leaps in progress. At the same time, we must pause and take notice of the most basic and most essential elements of teaching and learning to be sure that none of them are being left behind. As we shed outdated tools and methodologies, we can and must retain our ability to connect with each other as people. This connection will maintain the highest quality of teaching and learning on our campuses.

Notes

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