5 Ways Schools Can (And Should) Go Low-Tech

Jessie Voigts (/u/usdd054/jessie-voigts) • Jul 28, 2015

I will never forget my eighth-grade social studies class in 1982.

We were tasked with giving presentations on current events. I chose to share my take on some news stories via music, and worked hard to make a mixtape that was short enough to fit into the time allotted for the presentation (think snippets of music,

interspersed with me explaining ways in which each song related to current events).

When I pushed the play button on my (large) boom box, the class gasped — pop music in the classroom?! My fellow students were entranced; it was the talk of the school for days; and I got an A-plus. It taught me the power of bringing something different into a school setting — and the value of creative thinking.

High-Tech vs. Low-Tech

Many of today's classrooms are high-tech — and the technology is a giant leap from my homemade mixtape and a boom box. While this is a good thing in a lot of cases, *too much* technology can have a detrimental effect on both the function of the classroom and the learning that happens within it.

There is value in experiencing quiet, in creating, in having space to think without multitasking, in collaborating, and in dialing down technology to focus on learning. By participating in low-tech activities (both at school and at home), students can gain a deeper understanding of a subject. This approach can help students to delve deeply, to spend time focusing on one task instead of several.

Advantages of Analog Learning

Low-tech learning can be an efficacious use of time and resources. It can bring creative thinking and new modes of learning to the classroom. Experience-based learning (https://www.noodle.com/articles/what-is-project-based-learning) is something that *every* student can learn from. Technology use at home varies from student to student, as does each child's technological experience and knowledge — but low-tech learning is is available to everyone, everywhere, at a low cost.

The approaches below can increase creativity, enrich learning, facilitate collaboration, address multiple intelligences, empower creative and thoughtful discussion, and physically pull students together. These are all things that seem to be fading in today's high-tech education world.

Classroom Projects

Here are five essential low-tech ideas that facilitate deep learning.

1. Class Newspaper or Newsletter

Sure, a class newspaper can be made quickly and easily on a computer. But the skills that are required to complete a project like this are the same regardless of the medium — visualizing the finished product, writing, drawing, taking photos, designing, laying out text and images, and editing. Go as low-tech as possible!

Decide on a theme for the newspaper (event-based, seasonal, monthly), and ascertain where student interests and abilities lie. Send the photographers out to snap the photos, get the writers to brainstorm content, task the designers with format and function. Drawing the newspaper will increase spatial awareness. Writing content by hand will facilitate a more thoughtful creation process. Having students work together in teams without technological distractions will create meaningful partnerships and encourage learning. They'll discover firsthand how to work together, and this experience will likely alter their perceptions of themselves and of their peers as they become a productive team.

Take the class newspaper one step further, and tie it to a book you're all reading in English class, or to a period or era that you are studying in history. The class can research newspapers from that era and see what was included and important to this historical audience. Then create a newspaper from that universe — using the voices of fictional characters or historical figures. Using this approach, you'll be able to tie in history, geography, language, events, art, culture, sports, politics, and even food.

2. Global Video Chat

I know several teachers whose classes participate in global classroom Skype exchanges (https://www.wanderingeducators.com/best/stories/technology-enables-global-collaboration-classrooms.html), in which an American class chats in real time

with a class in a different country. While this incorporates technology (one Internet-connected computer), a project like this prioritizes group participation over isolated learning.

Gathering students together to meet and discuss topics of interest to both classrooms, including current events, can lead students to develop a deeper understanding of the world. Skype (https://education.skype.com/) offers a wide variety of opportunities for classrooms to connect. I suggest taking this one step further and setting up pen pals, establishing collaborations on projects, and brainstorming ideas for the two classrooms to learn together on different topics and in different ways. A project like this may eventually facilitate student exchange.

3. Guest Speakers

Guest speakers offer another powerful, low-tech opportunity for learning, and they can address a variety of interests. Go beyond the traditional guest speaking list (parents, police officers, firefighters, local politicians), and ask your students whom they would love to hear. Maybe it's a leader in global public health, an author on a book tour, an organic farmer, a librarian, an artist, or an athlete. Maybe it's someone who has a passion that is entirely different from her nine-to-five job! While the guest speaker is there, have your students put away all their devices and listen, ask questions, and get inspired.

4. Student Speakers

Another way to include speakers in the classroom is to have your own students create presentations on their passions and then tie those to subjects they're learning about. Then, allow time for class discussion to share additional knowledge and facilitate learning.

A skateboarder can demonstrate the physics involved in the sport. A comic book artist can share her love of storylines, dialogue, and characters. A student who loves Minecraft can discuss architecture, the tools of building, social dynamics, crafting

elements, and more. A soccer player can track the global movement of players, as well as the ways in which cultures around the world embrace this sport. A cook can explain the history of a dish or cuisine and then vivify her lesson with tasty samples.

The effects of these presentations will reach far beyond the subject matter. They'll embrace the diversity in our lives, encourage students to pursue their interests, teach the elements of successful public speaking, and facilitate a deeper understanding of both classmates and community.

5. Collaborative Writing

One of my favorite low-tech learning tools is collaborative writing (https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/teaching/first-year-writing-pedagogies-methods-design/collaborative-learninglearning-peers). While we see a few examples of this in young adult literature (https://www.noodle.com/articles/7-young-adults-books-that-taught-us-important-life-lessons) and some in journalism, as well, it isn't an oft-used tool in the classroom.

Collaborative writing can be undertaken in any subject. Assign students to small groups, and remember that often the more students are in a group, the longer it will take for them to figure out how to work together (though this is not necessarily a bad thing!).

Have them write together: papers, short stories, round-robin pieces, reports, articles for your class newspaper, or journal entries from a particular historical period you are studying or from characters in a book you are reading. Assign students to conduct peer reviews on papers they've written on their own, or workshop co-authored pieces as a class to teach students about editing and critiquing. One strategy that's particularly useful for sensitive or shy students is the criticism sandwich: give a piece of positive feedback, then explain what needs the most work, then give another compliment.

Teach empathy and global understanding
(http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2229) with multiple-voice writing,
presentations, and discussions. Publish books together
(http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2174) — you can do this at any age, and
around any topic (I publish a book of my students' writing each term, so they are all
published authors!). This can circle back to the skills your students have learned from
creating a newspaper, but on a larger scale. You may choose to include art and
photography by your students.

Whatever form it takes, collaborative writing increases student engagement, improves
social and group communication skills, and draws from the well of knowledge and
experience that students bring to the classroom.

A Final Word

There's no debating that high-tech classrooms are great for accomplishing many tasks
relevant to today's fast-paced world. But when used properly — and in concert with
high-tech tools — low-tech learning can help to build a stronger, more empathetic
classroom community.

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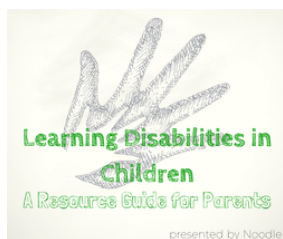
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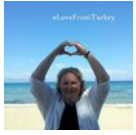
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Travel writer, international educator, mom

Jessie Voigts has a PhD in International Education, has lived and worked in Japan and London, and traveled around the world. She's published six books about travel and intercultural learning, with more on the way. Jessie is constantly looking for ways to increase intercultural understanding, and is passionate sharing the world through her site, Wandering Educators (http://www.wanderingeducators.com). She loves study abroad, is one of the most influential travel bloggers and a White House Travel Blogger, and is co-founder of Writing Walking Women. She founded and directs the Youth Travel Blogging Mentorship Program, teaching teens all around the world.

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