Come With Me: EdTech and the Journey into Better Realities

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The security guard at the gift shop grabs both me and my student athlete by the arm. I don’t know what is wrong, but he twists my arm just so and whispers a command from between clenched teeth in a tone that suggests that the thing that is wrong is both me and my student.

Come With Me

In almost every popular vision of dystopia that our culture celebrates, this statement—“Come with me.”—is the invitation to consciousness. This is true in The War of the Worlds, The Wizard of Oz, The Matrix, 2Pac/Makaveli’s “Hail Mary”, The Hunger Games, The Avengers, and the PlayStation classic, The Last of Us. As the literature goes, there is the invitation. There is a journey. Then, depending on how the characters use their talents and their resources, there is either liberation or some kind of sociopolitical damnation.

“Come with me.”

When it comes to instructional technology, we often extend the same invitation to our students. If we can equitably teach skills and share resources; liberation. If we fail to do so; public scholastic damnation. In the short time that edtech has been “a thing” in our profession, we have witnessed both.

“Come with me,” the guard’s words reverberate. I am still in good enough shape to outscore most of my students in soccer. Despite my fitness, the officer’s merciless grip on my upper arm hurts. I imagine how it must feel to the twelve-year-old boy being dragged by the same grip.

“Come, With Me.”

The questions that guide the future of education, of equitable access, of digital literacy, and of educational technology are not “what’s the best app to use?” or “how do I configure my server?” That kind of edtech is dead. There is nothing left to learn there. The new apps will always cannibalize the old ones, and the server configurations will still require us to call the helpdesk and hold the line for five more minutes.

Rather, the question that we face now is “How are we using our tools to approach and work through the difficulty often associated with the dystopia of now?”

“Come with me…” the guard exhales. My student looks to me. I am immobile. The guard is impatient. He tightens his grip and drags us toward the back of the establishment.

Immediately I am furious. My intellect burns with one desire. I need to know why. Now.

But we’ve all seen the videos. We’ve mourned the names that become hashtags. Our grandmothers have warned us. We know what happens to those who question authority in this way. So I decide to comply.

Our Journey Begins

When we talk about our current historical moment, educators, sociologists, and activists have highlighted the widening gap between the promise of education and the lived experience of so many of our students. Ray Bradbury once suggested that the difference between dystopia and utopia is not the presence of difficult things. Difficult things will always be present. The difference between utopia and dystopia is how we use our innovation, our will, our creativity, and our technology to approach those difficult things.

The most difficult thing is not to swallow my rage, silence my question. The most difficult thing is trying not to meet the eyes of the young man on the other side of our shared indignity.

I do not want him to see me giving up.

I am his language arts teacher and his soccer coach.
Voices from the Middle  ■  VOLUME 25  ■  NUMBER 4  ■  MAY 2018

“Never give up” is my religion. My fear has immediately made me an infidel to this doctrine.

I have stressed the importance of knowing, of reading, of questioning and critiquing. I have taught children to form principled arguments; to speak and to write brilliantly, and I have promised them that their ability to do so will move them forward in life. That it will keep them safe. We have all made those promises.

But this officer is forcing me and all of the students watching into a more enduring understanding: We teach students to question in a world that often demands and sometimes forces compliance.

As police arrive on the scene, a dream field trip becomes nightmare. “I saw you take that toy,” the uniformed man barks at the boy. “I saw you put it in your pocket.”

My players are gathering at the scene. Unsure of what to do, they wear expressions that move from confusion to anger to fear. They also wear pocket-less soccer shorts.

They all seem to come to this realization at once.

No one on my team could have pocketed anything.

One young man moves toward me, smiling. He starts to speak. I know that his intention is to address the uniformed man holding me and to explain away this misunderstanding. The three uniformed men on the scene do not. Rather, this sudden movement puts them on edge. Tension.

Sensing this, the teammates abruptly still him.

Silence.

Though I teach voice and freedom and creativity and self-advocacy and truth, in that instant the boys know what I know—that there are places and moments where none of this matters.

The worst moment of my career was not being publicly and wrongfully humiliated by a gift shop guard in front of my students. The worst moment of my career has been watching twenty-three young boys learn to extinguish their ability to speak up for themselves.

For many children, silence is an implicit lesson learned daily. It is learned wherever testing becomes big and students become small. It is learned when our devotion to executing the curriculum outweighs our devotion to cultivating the learning. . . . when the grade means more than the growth. When the answer becomes more important than the meandering journey to find it. . . . We teach silence when our assumptions about who students are erode our sense of who they can become.

Implicitly, we teach silence, because sometimes our students witness our own silence about the things that matter to them, to their communities, and to their futures. It does not have to be this way. We can plot a different reality. We can imagine and build a stronger future.

Moving Forward with EdTech

With all of our twenty-first-century innovations, we remain stuck—still grappling with the challenge issued by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his second inaugural address: “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” In 1937, with The Depression behind us, we started movement toward a greatness that we have yet to equitably achieve or wholly sustain.

We have always known that education is the foundation of this movement. The job of a teacher is not just to approach the difficult things. It is to prepare students to confront those difficult things with us.

Thanks to all the tools that we have at our disposal now, this work is more doable than it has ever been.

As Teachers, We Are Ultimately Designers

There is so much that makes children unique. They learn and thrive in so many beautiful ways. They move. They imagine. They play. They bend. They break. They reinterpret. They question.

When we consider that children control very little in their lived realities, the work that they do to make sense of the worlds that we construct for them—what food to eat, what clothes to wear, how to speak, think, or exist—is passionately innovative. The children that we serve are entrepreneurs engaged daily in the work of creating social ecosystems that work for them. When they break our rules, defy our authority, or upend our expectations, these are simply iterative missteps.

Our work as teachers can be similarly design oriented. We can identify the engineering work that kids are already doing and give them tools to do that work better. We can teach children to productively deconstruct practices and systems that do not work for them.

Want more friends? Your iterative design work of calling out in class is getting you the attention that you want, but learning is suffering as a result. I can help you to design a better way.
Hate sitting still? I understand why you engineered a program that allows you to walk around the room, but as it is, that approach creates many distractions. We can refine your approach to allow for fewer.

The kids are not broken. Our nineteenth-century approaches to their twenty-first-century social entrepreneurship is.

We can get the outcomes that we want in classrooms without extinguishing kids’ creative flames. Understanding that they are simply trying to illuminate the darkness that casts shadows on the path to productive adulthood, we cannot deny them these fledgling embers. They will find ways to allow them to burn, and those embers can either be used to ignite resentment against teachers and schooling or to spark productive innovation. The choices that kids make in this regard are almost always dictated by our adult response to their entrepreneurial attempts.

Twenty-first-century learning starts when we use design thinking to build school and classroom culture that all children can participate in and benefit from. Kids cannot be the only ones expected to innovate. That responsibility belongs to us too. Moving forward, a powerful way to use design thinking and instructional technology is not to fix the children, but to identify and fix the practices, methods, and curricula that do not work in the service of all children—or those that exclude them altogether. Being inclusive is not always based on race or gender, nor is it limited to drafting a policy or mission statement. Inclusivity is about making sure that the expectations, discipline policies, curricula, grading systems, community traditions, and classroom procedures allow all kids access to the learning and socializing that happens there.

As a society we have grown to understand that the “rules” say that one must walk in a crosswalk. There are people for whom walking is a physical hardship. The rules, for those people, are altered to allow them to use wheelchairs or crutches in the crosswalk. Few challenge this anymore. We know that “fair” does not mean that everyone gets the same. It means that everyone has access. As such, if talking or writing or sitting cross-legged on a rug presents a hardship for kids, we can work with them to build other ways for them to express what they know and participate. The kind of technology work that matters allows for this kind of building. This is fair. Curriculum can be reimagined—for even just one student—to represent this fairness. So can classroom norms, traditions and systems.

This work requires creativity and bravery. This kind of institutional creativity or professional bravery is not a trait ascribed at birth. They are attributes that can be learned, practiced, reimagined, and refined. As educators, this is where we excel. Here are some quick considerations for when we want to do imaginatively inclusive work in our classrooms.

- What do I want my students to be able to do? Have I helped students to understand why this goal matters and how these skills benefit them?

  “So that you will get a good grade” is not how a skill can benefit a learner. We can help young people understand that using evidence will help you get your way more often when you speak to people or that being able to think about symbolism will help you to be the person in your friend-group that always has something to say about movies and games. You’ll see more and be more interesting to others.

- As they move toward this goal, what trends am I seeing?

  Our design work starts here. As educators we often note that a thing “went wrong”. Here, we can study how it went wrong. This is what a great coach does. I don’t just see that you overshot the ball. I see how you overshot it. I noticed that your follow-through went left, so the ball went left. This will be my feedback—not a score or a grade. You’ll have an opportunity to try this again. Immediately. And when you do, it might not be perfect, but it will be an iterative improvement. How are we doing this work in our classrooms?

- Do those trends stem from barriers that might be in the way of students’ progress?

  Often those barriers are related to working conditions in the classroom or at home, tools that kids can/can’t use, or to their accumulated experience/insight. Sometimes we find that the barriers to kids’ progress are unintentionally imposed by the curriculum or by us. It helps to ask, “Does the assignment or task have to go this way?” For example, we found that kids comprehend books better when they can talk to someone about them, so we concluded that for some children, reading did not have to be silent. We also discovered that some kids who rehearsed their ideas by recording their own talk and listening to the audio before writing sometimes wrote more powerfully. So for some kids, audio recording became part of their writing process.
What people, approaches, devices, and apps do we have at our disposal that could remove or provide bridges over these barriers? What kind of thinking work are we doing with kids about how to best use these things to reach their goals?

As in any design work, there will be missteps here. These are the missteps that often lead people to give up on technology—or to give up on children—but these missteps are an important part of the iterative process.

How might I have the kids work differently, communicate, or use tools that help them to eliminate these barriers? This work is not cheating. This kind of work that ensures that kids can access the teaching and learning happening in school is the very definition of fair.

How can I ensure that kids have access to these tools when I am not around? Cultivating independence is at the heart of what we do as educators, and it is at the heart of good design.

We can teach children how to find and do the work that matters. To them. Now.

Teaching is a profession chosen by people for whom simple notions of “hope” are not enough. The world won’t get better on the strength of our hopes and aspirations alone. It will get better on the strength of our work.

Children know what works for them, their families and their communities. They are also intimately familiar with what doesn’t. They know the problems that they want to solve. If we can teach them to study these problems, to build coalitions to approach them, to design solutions, and to evaluate the progress they make, then college- and career-readiness will not be a challenge at all.

We can use classroom-based technology to

- Find and learn from the people already engaged in that work that children want to do.
- Research and think about all the ways that a problem can be solved.
- Create and share possible plans of action.
- Recruit others to the work.
- Seek feedback.
- Make adjustments.
- Share outcomes.

We can use classroom-based technology to

Professor Thomas Philip warns us, “Technology has been proffered as a tool that can ensure that teachers teach students the right way. Such innovations are rooted in underlying assumptions that reduce teaching to discrete sets of knowledge and tasks that can presumably be better delivered and assessed by technology” (Philip & Garcia, 2013, p. 301).

We are wise to remember that the function of language in any society is to communicate the ideas that make life better for the people who share that society. As such, crafting a message, deepening knowledge, championing a cause, and doing the online/offline work to further that cause are the language arts.

For us, the language arts became real when the class returned to school from the disastrous field trip, and we reached out to Officer Jason, a policeman in our neighborhood. The memories of our trip were less than a week old, and students were rightfully outraged. That outrage would not subside. The question “Can they do that to us?” eclipsed anything else that we could talk about. In eighth grade, the injustice of To Kill a Mockingbird, while relevant, was distant theory to our lived reality. We needed answers, and Jason provided them. “Yes, they can. No laws were broken. . . they shouldn’t have handled it that way, but they can.” This disappointing discovery could have been the end. But with twenty-first-century education, learning does not end after a discovery. It continues through discourse.

Jason connected us to other young people who were interested in creating safer communities, and what started as an email introduction became our kids caucusing via videoconference with other kids around the city to discuss safety and law enforcement. These discussions yielded more questions, and more questions became more research that we started on databases but finished by talking to parents and to community members about the history of policing in our neighborhood. We combed the blogs of neighborhood
and block associations to identify local experts, and we talked to them about their visions for community policing too.

In all, kids read pages and pages of news articles, community blogs, and police reports. They wrote tens of emails and facilitated several conversations a week. In this work was inference, questioning, synthesis, main idea, crafting claims, looking for evidence, and considering counterclaims. But also in this work was databases and social media and posting and emailing and videoconferencing. Curiosity, literacy and equity was the work. Technology was simply the tool. This should always be the case.

My lessons were not about how to use Google to collaborate effectively nor about how to conduct a video conference professionally. Those were by-products of the real work that kids did because they had passionate work that needed doing.

We’ve replicated this work almost every year since. It does not always have to start with an issue. Sometimes kids want to reach out to their favorite entertainers to discuss representation or body image. Sometimes kids want more insight into sneaker culture. Sometimes kids just want to collaborate with another kid across town on a goofy narrative or vanity project. We cannot hope to make student voice central if we do not first make their issues central. Again, this is language arts.

This is how the Declaration of Independence came to be. There was a concern. There was communication. There was collaboration, compromise, and creation. This is also the essay that tells your mom the three reasons why you need a dog. It is the open letter from a class of twelve-year-olds to gift shop management. It is the virtual meetings held between kids and security agents so that they understand each other. It is the official apology that children get in the mail, and it is the knowledge that a temporary silence does not have to be the end of civil discourse.

These are not “what app do we use” concerns. Moving forward, digital literacy must be about “what message can I communicate” and “how can I expand access to opportunity for my immediate community and for the infinite communities of people that I can reach with my voice?”

**Reference**