Finding a Mindful Balance with Technology

This weekend, I had the opportunity to spend time with other administrators learning about the power of technology from our very interesting guest speaker, George Couros. I left with so many great ideas about how to better integrate technology in my school. I was also left questioning the role of technology in mindfulness education.

During the day, I rarely stop using technology, and often that extends into my home life. I hate to admit it, but it is not unusual for me to be watching television, working on my computer, and checking email on my iPhone all at the same time. This is the same thing I see with many of my students. The space our children live in is fast pace and technology has very much shaped how they live in the world. A vast amount of information is just a click away and even communication and friendships have gone online. In Goldie Hawn's book, "10 Mindful Minutes," she argues that in some ways this has created what she calls a "butterfly brain." Constantly flitting from subject to subject, we lose focus on the single task. Brain research has shown that this "butterfly brain," can be toxic to brain development. It has an impact on cognitive functioning, memory formation, focus and attention, and, when socialization predominately shifts online, to the development of healthy interpersonal relationships. With that said, does technology have a place in mindfulness education? After much reflection, I would argue that it does.

To argue that technology has a place in mindfulness education may seem ironic, as the two often seem like opposing forces. With that said, technology can also play a very positive role in a child's education and in the development of a more mindful child. Below are just some of the "mindful" uses of technology in the classroom.

Technology can connect us as a community of learners

I recently watched a fascinating documentary called, "I AM." It is well worth a watch and can be viewed on iTunes. One of the many powerful messages in the documentary is that the human desire, above all else, is for connection and mutual cooperation. When used efficiently, technology has the capacity to connect us as a community of learners and can also foster a sense of interdependence and cooperation fundamental to any mindful classroom environment. The following YouTube clip illustrates how one school in Hawaii used technology to connect as a school, as well as to their community, to the larger world, and to their own family histories.

Technology allows students to share powerful ideas

In our recent technology presentation, our speaker, George Couros, quoted Chris Lehmann when he said, "It is no longer enough to do powerful work if no one sees it." Our students are a wealth of powerful ideas and their capacity for kindness, compassion, and empathy always inspires me. Technology has provided students with the opportunity to share their thoughts and issues of deep importance to them like never before. One of these students is my friend's son, Cole Philipp. Inspired by a simple school project on "Paying it Forward," he took his learning and passion for an orphanage in Mexico to another level. Using what he knew about blogging and social media, he set up a facebook page, created his blog http://www.philipp.ca, and documented his journey. A grand total of $35,000 later, he continues to raise awareness for a cause close to his heart.

While Cole raised money for an orphanage in Mexico, former Coquitlam student, Zoya Jiwa used technology to share her struggle with lupus. It was through her

experiences that she created her own positive self-esteem program she calls, "Simply You." Through her multi-media presentations, and her TEDXKids Talk, Zoya now puts on workshops, talks to schools, and works with students to enhance self-esteem and healthy body image.

Technology allows us to spread kindness, compassion, and empathy

There are many ways to improve brain function, and participating in acts of kindness is just one of them. Each time we do a kind act, we grow our brain's capacity for care. Dopamine levels rise in the brain fostering a positive mood and increased levels of optimism, energy, and self-esteem. We also know that watching kind acts gives us a similar positive experience. A few years back, a group of School District 43 students, with their counsellor, started Random Acts of Kindness. Before they knew it, Random Acts of Kindness became a nationally recognized day and sparked thousands of people to use technology to document their own kind acts.

For a few samples, click on any of the links

Student Kindness Project

Sticky Hearts Campaign

Free Hugs Campaign

Technology connects us to the larger world

It was not that long ago, that our world seemed like a much smaller place. The chances of knowing what the average person was doing halfway across the world were nonexistent. Technology has allowed students to connect to the larger world in an unfathomable way. My former leadership students used technology to create presentations on issues affecting students in other parts of the world. YouTube has also provided educators with the opportunity to put a human face to issues

plaguing our society both locally and globally. Mrs. Andrews's Grade 2 class took their passion globally when they used Facebook to create the Kindness Project. Their goal was to challenge a million people across the world to participate in a Random Act of Kindness. Upon my last check, they had over 16,000 subscribers. Students used this Facebook project to connect to the larger world, explore the countries their followers lived in, and engage in discussion based on the comments and random acts of kindness left on their Facebook page. In this case, the use of social media took the simple message of kindness to a global level and left students feeling they had left their positive mark on the world.

Technology has the capacity to increase student engagement

One of the biggest goals of education should always be to inspire and engage students in life and in learning. Technology has provided one positive tool for engagement. What we know about student engagement is that when students are fully engaged in an activity, they are most often present in the moment. In addition, when students are involved deeply in their own learning, it has a significant impact on the brain. Involvement in meaningful activities increases dopamine levels which increases alertness, attentiveness, quick thinking, motivation, and mental energy. Meaningful, engaging activities also create a positive association with school and learning, and aid in the rich formation of memories needed for future learning. In the following YouTube clips, two sisters explain how technology allowed them to engage in a deeper understanding of Japanese internment. One of the students explains that in the past, she read a book and maybe completed a worksheet. Using technology, she argues she was able to make much more out of her learning than could ever be demonstrated on a page.

While we all need to be mindful of our dependence on technology, and on some of the negative impacts it can have on brain development when used improperly or in excess, the value of technology still exists in any mindful classroom environment. The key is to find a balance between using technology to enhance learning and providing students with the inner tools needed to calm their minds in a very fast pace world. While students can’t slow down the world they live in, mindfulness education is one of the keys to living more successfully within it.