Tech Learning Potluck

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Abstract

We will share experiences of learning and teaching technology, exploring pedagogies, barriers to learning, and recurrent misconceptions that arise in learning to use computer applications. To ground the discussion, we will start the event by each taking turns in both learning and teaching how to do something with a particular application.

Keywords: Learning Technology, Teaching Technology, Storytelling, Pedagogy.

Overview

We are all subjected to an onslaught of new gadgets and applications for our computers, tablets and phones. New applications and new versions of old applications are percolating into our work lives and our family lives, our health and exercise activities and our social interactions, even into religious practices.

It is most unlikely that a training course will be on offer at the time we need it. Many people cope by learning informally from friends, family and colleagues, or ‘playing around’ or fiddling with the application. This is often successful, but a lot of people find this way of learning technology rather alien or daunting, and even technophiles have had frustrating learning experiences when things went wrong. It is all the more galling when the application’s marketing proclaims that it is “easy to use”, “intuitive” or “so simple a child could use it”. Failures in the light of such proclamations can make you feel old, inadequate and obsolete.

But does it need to be that way? Are some people wired to be good at learning technologies, while others remain bewildered? Or perhaps it is simply that some people have some skills and a degree of confidence that others lack. Can we teach the skills that will help people be more confident and effective in learning technologies? Are iSchools the place to take ownership of this challenge? The topic is a wonderful mixture of research, teaching, and service that plays to many of our strengths and interests.
Alternative Event Description

We will explore these ideas by sharing our experiences—both successful and frustrating—of learning technologies ourselves and helping others to learn themselves.

Intended Audience

People who are involved in teaching technology, especially those interested in enabling learners to take greater control of their technological learning and coping as a lifelong endeavor. This is likely to include but not be limited to those interested in the learning of technology by children, undergraduates, graduate students, office workers, scientists, older people, people with various disabilities, and socially disadvantaged or marginalized groups. Although much technology learning takes place outside formal classroom settings, we want to invite participation from those who teach technology classes, those who study or facilitate more informal or incidental technology learning, and those who observe technological learning, helping, adoption or appropriation in a particular setting.

First Activity: Sharing Skills in a Tech Learning Potluck

Be prepared to teach someone how to do something with a computer application in five minutes. Pick an application that you like using, perhaps one that improves your productivity or your life in some small way. Your chosen application could run on a laptop, smartphone, or tablet computer. Ideally, you will bring along the device with you (we will have wifi access). But if you do not have a device, bring a skill that you can teach on someone else’s networked device. A web-based service might be a good idea. For example maybe you know how to do something clever with Google calendar that you suspect that others do not. If you have a number of small things you can teach, that’s even better. We will form up into pairs (facilitated by the organizers) with each participant trying to teach another how to use their application to do something, and learning a new one in turn. We will then repeat with a different pairing, and if time permits, a third.

Second Activity: Sharing Stories about Tech Learning and How to Support it

Inspired by these immediate experiences of learning and helping others to learn a technological feature, we will discuss aspects of the process of tech learning, including various barriers and difficulties and how to address them. Participants will be encouraged to illustrate issues by examples from the potluck as well as from their wider experience. By having a rich set of examples of challenges and approaches we will be in a better position to observe both recurrent themes (similar things in different settings) and variations (different versions or outcomes of a similar issue). Storytelling is a particularly effective way of sharing ideas and issues around contextualized learning of technology.

We will talk about various barriers to tech learning and the strategies and tactics people have used to facilitate or demystify it. Sometimes the challenge is just understanding what needs to be learned, the prerequisites and what to learn first. Often the issue is the larger need to learn how to learn. Some likely topics include:

- Do we know how to build “technical self efficacy”?
- Distorted perceptions of the costs, risks and benefits of tech learning.
- Understanding different kinds of technology or computer phobia.
- Issues in “learned helplessness” from bad tech experiences.
- Classic recurrent misconceptions about computational technologies, learning, and tech learning.
- Approaches, strategies and tactics that participants have used to address the above.
- Ways to facilitate tech learning, including productive interactions with online communities.
- Learning skills and techniques that people may be lacking.
- Ways to overcome gender biases in tech fiddling.
- Supporting people in learning to do what they want to do, not what we think that they should do.
• How is it different if the people doing the tech learning are children, adults, graduate students, professors, office workers, elderly people, someone trying to apply for an entry level job using their first ever online application form in a public library, etc.?
• Which issues recur regardless of who is learning, what or where?

But no doubt others will emerge out of our discussions. We have created a Google Doc for participants to share stories, techniques, references and resources: [http://goo.gl/7U60p](http://goo.gl/7U60p)
This will be used in preparation for the event, as a way of sharing what emerges during the event, and as a subsequent resource.