



The TLT Group
Teaching, Learning, and Technology
A Non-Profit Corporation

Why Bother?

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For a closely-related TLT Group workshop "task", see:
<<http://www.tltgroup.org/gilbert/WhyBotherWorkshopTasks.htm>>.

We have no clear proof of the major educational benefits from making big investments in academic uses of information technology. As more faculty members and students are encouraged to use technology for teaching and learning, they expect to accomplish more, and they discover they need more help. The capacity of academic support services to provide that help usually falls farther behind as expectations rise. Costs go up and the "Support Service Crisis" gets worse.

So, why bother?

- Why bother making great investments of money, time, and effort to increase educational uses of information technology in colleges and universities?
- Why bother changing how we teach and learn?
- Why bother changing how we organize to teach and to learn?
- Where's the proof that the results will be worth it?

- Why should an academic leader risk making a technology investment decision that may make him/her look wasteful or foolish in 12 to 24 months? Or sooner!
- Why should a faculty member devote more time to learning about new applications of information technology and new ways of teaching?
- Why should a student learn how to use new instructional devices as part of earning a degree?
- Why should an academic support service professional try to keep up-to-date about new technology-dependent options for teaching and learning?

During the past 15 years I have often described the "Support Service Crisis" in colleges and universities -- the widening gap between expectations for what can be done to improve teaching and learning with information technology and the resources available to support such efforts. I describe the all-too-common unpleasant consequences of letting expectations get too far ahead of support resources. I also try to explain the lack of compelling evidence that would unequivocally confirm the educational benefits of major investments in information technology.

Often someone asks me to explain why, in spite of these unpleasant conditions, institutions and individuals should make increasing commitments to improving teaching and learning with technology.

The short answer:

Because more people will be able to learn and teach better.

However, I hope the following list gives you hope and justifies my own continuing optimism and enthusiasm more fully. I really do believe it is all worth the effort!

The last, more “visionary” section of this list may be the most important.

WHY BOTHER? THE LIST:

Essential Applications

A growing number of courses include topics from fields in which applications of information technology have become essential for doing important work (e.g., CAD/CAM for architecture, GIS in geography and related subjects).

New Instructional Capabilities

Topics can now be taught and learned that were nearly impossible (or too dangerous) to teach without the availability of new applications of information technology (e.g., remote sound-graph analysis for teaching pronunciation online; simulations of chemistry experiments in which expensive or dangerous chemicals might be used).

Meeting Varied Learning Needs, Preferences, Media

New information technology tools enable a teacher to provide learners with access to instructional materials that better match their individual learning needs or preferences—without making extraordinary demands on the teacher for preparatory time or special skills (e.g., capacity to produce audio narration to accompany text and images and to make it all simultaneously accessible on the Web).

Meeting New Expectations

Many students begin elementary school already familiar with computers and the Internet at home. Even more learners arrive at colleges, universities, and libraries with expectations about access to uses of information technology that were available in their secondary schools or in their workplace. Newly hired young faculty often have higher expectations than their predecessors about academic uses of technology.

Overcoming Difficult or Impossible Access

Telecommunications can provide access to instruction that would otherwise be unavailable due to learners' disabilities, inconvenient location, or schedule restrictions.

Higher Expectations Based on Use of Productivity Tools

As more faculty and learners have access to productivity tools (e.g., Word-processing, Email, Web), teachers can provide more frequent feedback, and students can make more frequent revisions when completing assignments. Teachers can more reasonably demand higher quality results.

Window to the Outside World

Using the Web, computers, and projectors, faculty can bring into traditional classrooms otherwise inaccessible resources (e.g., information, media, people, events).

Information Literacy

The exploding mess of information resources requires more sophisticated skills for finding, selecting, manipulating, modifying, and distributing information. Students (and faculty) need both more training and more experience in using information resources and tools within the academic environment as preparation for similar work elsewhere.

Collaborative Learning

Email, Web-based threaded discussion boards, and other tools more specifically designed to support teamwork and group communication can enable students to learn and work on projects together more easily. Technology can support many of the “collaborative learning” approaches already advocated by many faculty.

Career Necessity

Employers expect employees to demonstrate comfort, confidence, and mastery of basic skills related to the use of computers and telecommunications options. While many students can acquire some of that self-assurance and competence independently, many cannot. They need access to the technology and training.

Narrowing the “Digital Divide”

There is an educational, social, and economic gap between those who have frequent access to good quality information technology resources and those who do not. The significance and impact of this gap is growing. Providing learners with access to information technology and to introductory and compensatory training can help.

Competition

Institutional ability to compete for students, faculty, and grants is dependent to some degree on the apparent level of educational use of information technology.

Widening "Instructional Bottlenecks"

An experienced teacher can recognize the improvement in student behavioral patterns when a new instructional approach or new educational application of information technology has removed or widened an "instructional bottleneck."

Better Communication, More “Time on Task”: Better Learning

Educational research confirms the obvious impression that students learn more and better when they spend more time focused on work related to a course. When email provides a convenient, attractive means of communicating with other students in the course and with the instructor, many students are observed to spend more time communicating about the subject matter – and to learn more. The most surprising phenomenon may be the rise in course-content-related communication between students and faculty AFTER the completion of a course - when the students' grades are no longer susceptible to change.

Anonymity

For some students, it is easier to express some of their ideas anonymously. Email and Web options can enable anonymous communications. This can permit some students to participate more comfortably and frequently in some course-related discussions. Faculty can more easily obtain candid student responses about the progress of a course or about students' personal learning difficulties when students can easily respond anonymously. [Opportunities for anonymous comments must be carefully structured to reduce the likelihood of cruel or vacuous comments.]

Renewed Energy

Teachers and students regain energy and enthusiasm for their academic work as they find they can create new ways of learning and thinking -- made possible by new applications of information technology.

Accumulating Professional Judgment

A growing mountain of informal statements from faculty members, students, and others describing their conviction – based on experience – that their own use of information technology improves the quality and effectiveness of learning. Faculty members strongly resist giving up educational uses of information technology that they believe have demonstrably improved learning. "Anecdotal evidence" reflecting the professional judgment of experienced teachers cannot be dismissed.

[There is room for more answers to “Why Bother?”]

More Visionary Answers to "Why Bother?"

- So that we can preserve what matters most while transforming what needs to change.
- So that we can develop and sustain deeper human connections and avoid drowning in a flood of shallow communications.
- So that individual learners, teachers, and related support professionals can connect better to information, ideas and each other via effective combinations of pedagogy and technology - both old and new, on-campus and online.
- So that teachers, learners and academic support professionals have access to adequate RESOURCES and support services; and, consequently, they can believe in their own ability to improve teaching and learning.
- So that teachers, learners and academic support professionals believe they share RESPONSIBILITY for improving teaching and learning. But they know that those with knowledge, experience, and wisdom - especially the faculty, both individually and collectively -- retain the ultimate responsibility for guiding learning.
- So that everyone can teach and everyone can learn throughout their lives, at least once in a while. [“The best way to learn a subject is to teach it.” Learning by teaching is truly one of the most powerful ways of learning.]
- So that learners, teachers, and academic support professionals can be well-prepared to find, evaluate, select, and implement instructional options. So that they also have frequent opportunities to exchange ideas and information about academic content, skills, knowledge, and understanding; and about educational and technological options; and about communicating face-to-face, via telecommunications, and in all media.
- So that we can find hope in learning and joy in teaching.

And, finally:

"Information technology can be the excuse and the means to move closer to educational goals that we have been unable to achieve for decades - and to some new ones. With enough commitment of resources, thoughtful effort, patience, and luck, technology will help more than it hurts." - excerpt from "A New Vision Worth Working Toward -- Connected Education and Collaborative Change," February, 2000 version available at WWW.TLTGROUP.ORG.

Beyond This List

Also, see “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever,” Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996, at <http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html> for a more detailed discussion of several related categories: e.g., active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations.

For an interesting historical perspective that seems to be gaining some recognition within the home-schooling movement, also see: John Milton Gregory’s *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, revised edition (1917, original 1884), reprinted by Baker Book House, 1993. For a list of the 7 laws see:

<http://www.clearlight.com/~ccs/laws7.html><http://www.clearlight.com/~ccs/laws7.html>

Want to help? If you have other good reasons, I’ll extend this list. If you disagree with any items or with the implied conclusion, make your case! This list would be more useful with at least one good example for each category. If you have an example, please send a very brief title, summary paragraph (just a few sentences) and a URL where we can get more information. Please make very clear which “Why Bother?” reason/category your example best demonstrates. We’ll incorporate your additions and make the new version available via TLT-SWG and our Website.

Send your arguments, examples, URLs, or suggestions to:

GILBERT@TLTGROU.P.ORG and watch the TLT-SWG Listserv for more on this topic.