

The Changing World of Tech in Corrections Education

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Pony Express, USPS, Telephone, Newspapers, Magazines, Internet. The world of communications has been in perpetual change. Changes within the last 10-20 years have been experiencing exponential growth. There is a really interesting TED talk from Patrick Forth that suggests that new technologies will change every 18 months. The point here is that the world is changing, especially in the way that we access and use information. The core of learning is accessing and assimilating information and demonstrating it to others or in a new context. This article is about how the DOC has attempted to incorporate this exchange in a security-focused environment that, by its nature, needs to create barriers to the exchange of content for good reasons having to do with potential victimization and security.

Since coming to the DOC in April of 2018, I have been very impressed by the overall attitude of including technology into the learning process. Without the attitude of finding a “yes”, we would not have been able to get to the point we have reached. If you are in a place where you want to use more technology or want to better understand what is used or what is possible, it is easier to break “technology” into parts. The parts of a tech system include the hardware (PCs, Laptops, Chromebooks, Clearbooks, Mouse, Keyboard, etc.), the software (programs we use to do stuff such as MS Word, Adobe, and Outlook), the operating system (Windows, Chrome/cloud ready, Linux), and the network. For people using the systems, they want to turn on their computer, have it work for what they want to do and have no need to know how everything works. The problem with this thinking is that we are used to things working a certain way at home that don’t work the same way while at work.

Personally, when thinking about adopting new technology, I start with a basic problem. I then imagine what would happen for the end user if that problem were solved. I then look at how to implement this solution. There are three examples of this we have developed in the past two years at DOC, mostly with our 2nd Chance Pell Pilot program with Milwaukee Area Technical College. Those are explained on the following pages.

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Problem 1 - Students across the state getting work to instructors in Milwaukee

With the use of RACHEL devices, DOC opened access to content that could be changed on a regular basis and allowed modules developed by Milwaukee Area Technical College instructors to be added. Students watched videos, read articles/textbooks and responded to course work. They would go into their living units, handwrite responses, come to school to type responses, save them to a flash drive and have the coordinator email the instructor. The instructor would grade or provide feedback and send it back to the coordinator who reversed the process to give it back to the student. Not efficient. We needed a direct connection from student to teacher without email. We adopted a learning management system. It doesn't matter what system you use; there are many out there. The DOC will allow a website if it is a dedicated IP address that doesn't use content from other sites (you can't link a YouTube video to a lesson path as that jumps to YouTube even if it is embedded in your presentation). With our LMS system, our instructors can post new content when they find it and students can submit questions and assignments directly to them without using the DOC coordinator.

Problem 2 - The use of textbooks as the primary source of information

Textbooks are difficult to order, expensive, don't change frequently, and are hard to distribute each semester. We had a goal to eliminate the use of textbooks. A major shift happened in the DOC with the use of a vendor-based commissary tablet to allow inmates to order commissary and add entertainment (music, videos) to what they can purchase. The tablets opened the door to using personal hand-held devices within the living units, but they were neither robust enough to handle college level materials, nor were they interested in providing open access materials without fees. We considered several types of personal devices, but all needed to be connected to a network to function. We landed on a device that we have named "Clearbooks." The Clearbooks can be used in the living unit. They have a clear plastic chassis and no external ports except for power, headphones, and a docking port. This is important because a smuggled USB device can be used to store contraband content or include the ability to create a network to "talk" to other computer users. Students arrive at school and dock their device. The docking station gives them access to our inmate network which houses our LMS site, the FAFSA online

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application portal, and RACHEL. Students may download any resources they need for the classes they are enrolled, with a storage capacity of 200 GB. That means they can download all the textbooks for class, new videos, supporting videos, audio files and any content they need. They can take those back to the living unit to view and use. They also have a blank Google doc to use no storage on the Google account, and just specific resources such as Docs, Sheets, and Slides. All Google domain resources are managed by our tech department. With Cloud Ready, only resources within our play account can be used to type assignments, save to their device and upload to the LMS when they get back to school. There is no network storage. To back up their materials, inmates have personal space on the LMS.

Problem 3 - Some classes require a personal connection to the instructor

We are currently using at least one telepresence unit in each of our Pell sites. There are a lot of options in this element (Google “classroom video conferencing”), but the DOC uses Polycom. Polycom allows an instructor to teach class to several sites all at once. We have used this for World Language and Calculus classes. We have also used this system for 1-1 tutoring with a graduate student. The old remote learning systems were on analogue TVs with one screen per site/person. It was like watching TV which is a very passive process. The new technology and HD delivery makes it seem as though you are talking with someone through a window.

The Future

The future of technology within the DOC includes using the telepresence network to facilitate state-wide meetings with teachers about content and curriculum, expanding telepresence to all sites for use in our ABE courses, and hosting our own LMS system so that DOC teachers may use the same features to teach from their respective locations. I am always open to discussing ideas about expanding the use of technology as a delivery tool for educational content, so please do not hesitate to reach out if you have questions. Regardless of the technology we use, the single most important factor in educational attainment is the relationship between the instructor and the learner. This important fact must stay front of mind when thinking about how technology can be used to enhance instruction.

You may contact me to discuss your ideas at: BenjaminW.Jones@wisconsin.gov or 608-240-5165.