Reflections on Evolution in the Use of Information Technology to Enhance Teaching and Learning: From the University of the West Indies, to the United States, and Back Again

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This reflection provides my perspective as someone who has experienced the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus, in Trinidad and Tobago (TT) as an undergraduate and postgraduate student. I then traveled to the United States for masters and doctoral work and have since returned to serve UWI as a faculty member. It highlights the changes I observed in UWI’s approach to using information technology (IT) to enhance teaching and learning. It also reflects on how my perspectives evolved as I was exposed to using IT in the United States as a graduate student and teaching associate, and on how I am able to embrace the changes I see at UWI as a faculty member.

This reflection is relevant to diverse audiences. It can be of interest to international students who, like myself, have studied in the United States for many years and will return home to work as faculty members at their local universities. It can be of interest to prospective students or faculty members from countries outside the United States who may in the future visit the United States as exchange students or visiting scholars. It can be of interest to Americans who will visit other countries as teachers or visiting faculty. Finally, it can be of interest to those who may be on the cusp between embracing or resisting the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

My experience of teaching and learning as an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Arts was characterized by didactic techniques. This was typified by the use of lecture notes, “chalk and talk,” and very little interaction. This was the model of both delivery (teaching) and learning. Classrooms were lecture theaters, where faculty members delivered a lecture for about 2 hours. The extent of post-blackboard technology was the use of acetate overhead slides. This system was supported by tutorials for which smaller groups of students met with a tutor, yet even in the smaller tutorials there was a reliance on chalk, talk, paper, and ink to exchange ideas and transfer knowledge. Students took copious notes of the lec-
tures that were delivered live, and if you happened to miss a class you got the notes from others who attended the lectures. We developed the habit as students of photocopying notes if we succeeded in getting someone to share them. Assignments were accepted in longhand, with the sole exception of the final-year project, which had to be typed and bound. Grades and comments on assignments were paper based. Other resources outside the classroom reinforced this kind of approach and relied largely on paper and hard copies. For instance, the library services consisted of an old-fashioned catalog system that was manually organized and managed. Thus, to carry out research, you had to be there physically in the library.

From my learner’s perspective, this was a passive way of learning. I listened, made notes, and had little interaction with my professors. In classes, the capacity of my learning relied on my ability as an individual to listen and take notes and, outside of classes, to do additional reading through the library services. Despite all this, I excelled because this mode of delivery, I later discovered, suited my learning styles, which are auditory and read-write (Gardner, 1999). On reflection, whereas it suited me, it was probably limiting to other students who had different learning styles such as visual and kinesthetic (Gardner, 1999).

After graduating with my BA in History, I worked for three years in the public sector and then returned to UWI on a part-time basis to pursue a postgraduate diploma in public administration at the Faculty of Social Sciences. I found that little had changed in the learning and teaching environment: Talk and chalk was still the primary medium for learning and teaching. However, the library was changing its approach by using and experimenting with IT to improve and expand its services and facilities (e.g., by adding online catalogs, online databases, and electronic journals). This was making an incremental difference in the ways students could conduct research and access materials for their courses.

In 1999, I left Trinidad and Tobago to pursue my graduate education in the United States. I spent eight years at Arizona State University (ASU) where, in contrast with my earlier experiences at UWI, the use of IT was central to my learning and teaching. Initially, this was challenging for me since I had to overcome my relative lack of IT experience. Once I gained competence with the new IT skills, however, they became routine. I grew to expect them in my classes—whether as teacher or student—and in the ASU libraries.

I returned to UWI armed with a repertoire of IT skills and experiences I learned at ASU. In my first year as a faculty member, I was prepared to implement many IT techniques in my delivery of courses to enhance teaching and learning outcomes compared to my own experiences as a UWI student. To my great surprise, the landscape of UWI had dramatically changed with respect to IT and its role in teaching and learning. In those intervening years, UWI had developed a strategy that promoted and encouraged the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning. This was part of an overall greater emphasis on teaching and the scholarship of teaching.
One of the first things I noticed was the existence of an Instructional Development Unit (IDU). This unit is charged with the responsibility to oversee and lead the course of this change. It functions as a center for teaching and learning excellence for UWI St. Augustine. In October of 2007, IDU revised its goals to reflect the current Strategic Plan of UWI (UWI, 2010). These goals include the following:

- Promoting best practices in teaching at UWI
- Fostering the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) at the undergraduate and graduate levels
- Elevating the status of teaching at the St. Augustine Campus
- Certifying teaching through formalized programs
- Guiding the curriculum review process and approving curriculum documentation
- Becoming the authority for research on higher education in the Caribbean

On its website, IDU illustrates that it seeks to “perform a combination of academic, administrative, consultative and technological functions . . . workshops, [programs], and services are aimed at equipping teaching staff with the pedagogical skills and techniques needed for promoting student learning and achievement at the St. Augustine Campus” (UWI, 2010).

In so doing, IDU has been successful in providing workshops and activities to support “the purposeful use of information and communication technologies in learning and teaching” (UWI, 2010). Every semester, IDU organizes a calendar of events and workshops that highlight various aspects of using IT in the classroom and provide faculty members and tutors with a range of areas in which to hone their skills. Some examples of these workshop themes are plagiarism detection using Turnitin software, recording and sharing lectures using Camtasia software, and using myeLearning to support teaching and learning. In other workshops, participants learn how to create and use podcasts, blogs, wikis, video clips, and other information and communication technologies to enhance faculty members’ teaching effectiveness and the learning outcomes of students.

All of these IDU activities have allowed faculty members to be exposed to continuous expert training in using these technologies and new forms of media, and at the same time to have support while they are implementing and experimenting with them. For their part, students are being exposed to all kinds of IT in the classroom through PowerPoint lectures, use of video clips, and other IT support systems to equip them for a digital world and with technical skills in their coursework assignments and activities. MyeLearning is a free course management system similar to what I was exposed to at ASU in using Blackboard. Using this free course management system helps UWI, in a developing economy, to use IT and improve the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and,
at the same time, to manage its expenditures. In using myeLearning, students can download their lecture outlines before coming to classes, do online quizzes, submit coursework assignments, download supplementary course materials, be provided with links to URLs and library services (e.g., electronic journals and databases), register for tutorial sessions (e.g., some departments created e-tutorials for management students), and communicate with their classmates and professors more effectively.

IDU is also promoting SoTL using e-conferences such as its 2009 eLearning Conference as a framework that UWI St. Augustine can use to create a community of sharing among faculty members and the wider world. Additionally, while these e-conferences help those of our island nation to interact with others off-island, they also present opportunities for IT that are particularly suited to our culture. For example, the plenary speaker at the 2009 e-conference presented a research work in progress: Her team created an e-learning software platform titled Burrokeet, which allows for the creation of content packages (Bernard & Ramnanan, 2009). This software generated websites for secondary schools and allowed students with very little knowledge of IT to create and manage websites for their schools. This research team is transforming SoTL through this project, and they have partnered with the Ministry of Education to use it as a pilot project among secondary school students. This work is demonstrating that students are able to understand IT as an abstract subject using software that incorporates fun and lots of interaction into their learning (Bernard & Ramnanan, 2009).

IDU is helping faculty members to have a greater appreciation of their teaching effectiveness. Every two years, they present teaching awards (The UWI/Guardian Life Premium Teaching Excellence Award) through a highly competitive process to faculty members showing excellence in SoTL. This provides an opportunity to showcase faculty members who have raised the bar in the quality of teaching and learning via their practice and the ways they are able to engage their students effectively. These successful faculty members all use IT in some ways and are able to engage their students in dynamic ways. This year, the award will focus on how IT is being used to enhance SoTL at UWI St. Augustine Campus. I am eager to see the kinds of portfolios presented and the rich and unique ways that faculty members from multidisciplinary backgrounds are using IT to achieve interactive learning environments.

On reflection, I can say that IT has taken center stage in its role of enhancing teaching and learning at UWI, St. Augustine Campus. Students are challenged to learn to use and engage with the described forms of IT. Their technical skills are developing. For some like myself when at ASU, initially it will require a steep learning curve; but for others, it will be routine. IT is making a difference in the ways students can learn and faculty members teach. Properly designed, IT-assisted teaching and learning accommodates a universal approach that allows different learning styles to be highlighted, and this enhances learning inside and outside the classroom.
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As I reflected, I saw that not only did the UWI, St. Augustine Campus evolve during those stages of my academic development, but I also changed as I personally experienced the use of technology in teaching and learning in the United States at ASU, both as a graduate student and then as a teaching associate. Using technology became an important aspect of my teaching approach since I saw the added value it brings to my students—especially those who have more active learning styles—as they learn, and to me as I teach more effectively.

To conclude, I will leave you with some reflections, questions, and possible recommendations to consider. If you are at the cusp of change, perhaps you may have mixed feelings about the value of technology in teaching and learning. If you have experienced IT in a different culture, maybe you have grown to see the value in using technology versus the no-technology, talk-and-chalk method. Embrace IT-enhanced teaching and learning, and seek ways to continue to expand your skills in using it and in helping your students to be comfortable in using it. If, after being exposed to IT, you have returned to your country and found your colleagues are still using the old method of noninteractive lectures, I challenge you to consider incremental ways that you can introduce using IT in your teaching and encourage your students to develop these technical skills. Start small and build on what is already there to expand its use and application. If you are considering studying or serving as a visiting scholar to a U.S. university and you have no exposure to using technology, seek ways to learn and prepare yourself for that new experience. Become computer literate. Take basic courses in technology that can assist you to make an easier transition to a mediated classroom. Finally, if you are from the United States and might be interested in teaching in another country, prepare yourself that you may be faced with a university culture that is still making the transition from talk and chalk to using IT to enhance teaching and learning. In this case, adopt a middle ground where you can seek out ways to incrementally bridge the gap between a mediated approach and the more traditional approach. Use what resources exist; be prepared that not all will; and find ways to direct students to be interested in learning to use IT so they can adapt to this growing trend. My cross-cultural experiences in teaching and learning with and without IT assistance convince me that IT is simply better. It transforms learning inside and outside the classroom. It gives greater access to all learner types. Using IT in teaching and learning has opened a virtual world for me to use smart technologies for students’ engagement and learning.
References

