



# Election Guide 2009

## The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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# Advocate

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## FROM THE editor's desk

# Back to Basics

*"Bill Gates says, 'Wait till you can see what your computer can become.' But it's you who should be doing the becoming. What you can become is the miracle you were born to work—not the damn fool computer."*

—Kurt Vonnegut

*"To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society."*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Last semester I picked up a \$1,000 check from City College for a faculty development workshop that I participated in over the winter break. The workshop was designed to introduce interested faculty to the uses of technology in the classroom and was, no surprise, sponsored by Verizon. As a struggling graduate student who finds himself consistently behind on the rent, I was delighted to receive the money, but part of me feels bad (well almost) since it turns out I really have no intention now, nor did I ever, really, of using any more technology in my classroom than I normally would. In fact, instead of instilling in me a sense of possibility and excitement, the workshop made me deeply suspicious of the supposed pedagogical value of technology in general. Although it helped me realize that there are, indeed, several kinds of fascinating and interesting things you can do with web applications both in and out of class, I remained unconvinced that using those technologies would actually help my students to better learn the things that matter: how to be, for instance, a thoughtful and contemplative person capable of formulating, analyzing, critiquing, and communicating difficult and original ideas.

The leader of the workshop was, I am quite proud to say, an old student of mine from Hunter College who is now getting his PhD at the Graduate Center and is the head of the Writing Center at my campus. For the entire eight hours, he led the faculty members present that day through a series of exercises that were meant to introduce us to web-based applications that we could use to "help students learn." While I was familiar with most of the applications and platforms that were being introduced, I had never thought of using any of them in the classroom. From Google and Wikipedia, to YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Wordpress, and Facebook, we talked about the potential pedagogical value of these various information, publishing, and social networking platforms. It was a stretch, but we did our best to articulate the different ways we might use these programs or services in our classrooms. The idea of using blogs and Facebook pages was especially popular, as was the idea of using YouTube videos as learning tools.

After the workshop I felt obligated to think more about the ways that I could use some of this technology to help my students learn better, and, since I had to write a report on precisely that subject in order to qualify for the stipend, I spent a good amount of time contemplating my options. The more I wrote and the more I reflected on my thoughts, however, the more I realized that I didn't want to use any technology in my classroom: not this semester, not next, and if I could help it, not ever. In fact, the more I tried to justify and find a place for technology, the more I kept thinking about what was being lost. Sure, showing a YouTube video is a fine way to generate conversation, but it is the conversation, and not the act of watching a video that really matters, and in an English class, where the subject is language itself, does it really make sense to show a video? Technology, no doubt, provides a vast array of new options, but do we really need more of these kinds of options, and do any of them actually aid in the learning process or simply provide us with a temporary distraction from it? What are we sacrificing when we introduce new technologies into the curriculum? And what kinds of messages are we sending to our students?

In an age of increasing technological innovation and scientific breakthrough it is easy to get caught up in the idea that, as educators, we must prepare our students for the brave new worlds that await them. As our lives and our relationships with others become more and more mediated through the use of technology, it only seems reasonable that we should teach our students how to use those new technologies to their advantage. To question this assumption, to ask why seems like a selfish, almost churlish endeavor, designed to actively cheat our students out of their right to self-empowerment. Nonetheless, once the question is asked the answers become increasingly complicated.

First of all, the use of this kind of technology in the classroom not only assumes that it will remain a viable and useful tool (rather than, say, going the way of the Dewey Decimal system and the card catalog) but that the use of such technologies are a societal good. The idea that the university or academy, funded by Verizon; should feel obliged to keep pace with the entrepreneurial fits of the World Wide Web, or that we should feel ashamed not to be on top of the latest marketing device disguised as a communication platform, seems shortsighted.

Indeed, one of the things that frightens me most about the often uncritical embrace of technology in the classroom is the way that it potentially dehumanizes the educational experience, where students spend more and more time both in and out of class looking at video screens, computer monitors, Blackberries, and iPhones, rather than looking at the world around them, talking to each other, or most importantly, spending time alone with their thoughts. Sure, constant e-mail, tweeting, texting, and ironic Facebook updates may feel like meaningful communication, but what's really being communicated besides a desperate desire for the type of community that without the distance digital communication makes possible would already exist?

What concerns me most, however, is not what we are introducing into our classrooms—after all, I admit a preference for polished, word processed documents instead of smudgy handwritten ones—but what we might be losing. I'd like to make the argument that, despite our increasingly technological lives, or perhaps because of them, the creation and conservation of technology-free spaces where people can, and are encouraged, to communicate face-to-face, free of distraction, with nothing more than their unique temperaments and their private store of knowledge and eloquence, seems more and more important to me. Our students are already attention-dependent, and our classrooms, especially to privately owned, for-profit websites like Facebook and YouTube, as part of their schoolwork, seems at best counterproductive, and at worst incredibly irresponsible, even unethical. Instead, shouldn't we be encouraging our students to carve out spaces of time for themselves that are free from the distractions of the market and the market driven popular culture that typifies the Internet. Shouldn't we be encouraging them to be skeptical and critical of this mass culture, or better yet, encouraging them to ignore it completely. Should we not be inviting them instead to think in full sentences; to write more than 140 characters at a time; and to have the self reliance and self sufficiency to be alone with themselves and their thoughts for more than the seven or eight hours they spend unconscious each night.

As a profession we seem to have thoughtlessly embraced the idea of technology precisely because we see it as a way of making learning easier and more accessible for more of our students. Obviously—the logic goes—our students are comfortable using the Internet and social networking tools, so why not allow them to use those skills to learn? This kind of thinking is common among instructors who embrace popular culture because they think it will help their students "relate" to the course material. These are the same teachers who spend class time screening Hollywood versions of Shakespeare because students are supposedly incapable of understanding modern Elizabethan English or who teach rap lyrics or song lyrics as poetry, because it's easier for students to get the difference between a tenor and a vehicle when it's Tupac or Bob Dylan speaking rather than Dylan Thomas or Wallace Stevens. But our calling as educators extends beyond merely providing our students with opportunities to learn material. As educators we are also responsible for providing our students with experiences which they would not otherwise have access to, such as the experiences that result from finding solutions to difficult problems, engaged and thoughtful conversation, and collegial argument. But even more than this, it is important that we offer our students alternatives to the kinds of experiences provided by the technology of mass media. If we are going to insist on teaching them how to get by in the corporate world they've been given, we need to at least teach them that other worlds are still possible. ☺