

March 30, 2016

Greetings!

In the months before I took on the role as Associate Provost for Digital Learning, I spent some time thinking about the roadblocks that faculty face in attempting to change their research and teaching by integrating the wide variety of digital technologies at their disposal. Let's face it: it might be exciting to have the idea of trying something new, but if it is difficult to pull off, we will often drop it and simply return to what we already know will work. In short, the more "friction free" we can make the acquisition of digital tools, the more likely people are to use them.

As a result, I decided to do the following experiment: I wanted to consider integrating podcasts into my teaching this year. The idea was to have students in my media ecology course for spring 2016 (now!) produce a podcast to accompany their final papers. The problem was, I had never done podcasting myself and didn't know to whom I should turn to learn. The [Center for Teaching](#) seemed like one obvious place, but I wasn't quite sure. Now, what would I do if I were only partially motivated, I thought? Well, I would likely do what was easiest: either turn to friends of mine who I knew were podcasting in classes at other universities or I would simply drop the idea all together. In short, for me to change, the path needed to be as easy, and as friction free as possible.

What actually happened gave me an idea, however: after several days of not contacting anyone, I did a search on the Vanderbilt web page, only to discover that I had missed a workshop run by the folks at our main Library. I ended up writing a note to [Cliff Anderson](#), the director of Scholarly Communications for the library's digital services (and an all-around great guy). After hearing that I had missed this workshop, Cliff worked with [Ed Warga](#), who had run the initial workshop to set up another one for me (and I brought along several of my colleagues). Ultimately, I learned a few of the tools myself and had Warga run a podcasting workshop for the students in my "Media, Culture, Consciousness" course. While this has turned out well, what struck me was that had I not been pursuing this in a dogged fashion, I may have dropped the idea as soon as I noticed that I had missed the workshop. And while the library staff was amazing to work with (and have been every step of the way), I might not have found that out. As a result, I decided that one resource I wanted to make available would be a web page that asked the question "How do I . . . ?" and provide resources on campus for learning/implementing almost any digital tool.

I am pleased to note that with the help of the [Graduate Fellows](#) of the [Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning](#) and [Ole Molvig](#), I can now point to this [specific resource](#) and a more [general one](#) that provide faculty with a roadmap for implementing educational technology in the classroom. I hope these resources make it just a little easier for faculty and staff on campus to find the help they need for innovative research and teaching.

There is one other observation I would like to make this month on the same topic of friction free acquisition. Over the past several years, on this campus and many others, I have heard faculty complain about the difficulties they have faced in using Blackboard as a platform for teaching. There is no doubt that Blackboard has a great number of tools and capabilities, but if it is difficult for an instructor to learn to access and use those tools, only the most determined will do so. So, again, as an experiment this semester

I decided that every time I wanted to do anything with Blackboard and my course (e.g., utilize a class blog, have students turn in the papers through Blackboard, include my own video instructions on Blackboard), I would simply contact [Blackboard support](#) now offered through the Center for Teaching. Let me be clear about this: the staff support is amazing. Not only did they get back to me quickly with every irritating question I asked, but they politely and methodically walked me through each step. The support team, led by [Stacey Johnson](#), understands the need for a friction free experience, and they deliver.

Ultimately, I want to stress that everyone working in digital learning at Vanderbilt understands the strong desire for innovation on our campus amongst all of our colleagues, and we acknowledge that part of this process is to make innovation as accessible as possible. We are working toward that goal, and, given my own experiences this year, I believe we have the staff across the university to make that happen.



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