IN PURSUIT OF

**SMART LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

(A TEACHER’S REFLECTION AND SELF-REMINDER)

J. Sandra Sembel

Why do we have to be in pursuit of smart learning environment? The answer is probably simple: to find a way to make learning successful. But then, the next question may pop up: What is a successful learning? This question is certainly not easy to answer. It has moved many researchers, educators, philosphers to find the answer. Many answers have been presented, however, until now, no one answer has fully been satisfying. So, what’s the point of discussing this without any satisfying answer? Hang on. Don’t get irritated so quickly.

As learning is a journey, finding the answer to a successful learning is also a journey with no definite end. That’s what makes learning exciting and alive. Just like what Mark Twain said, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education,” which probably means Twain critisized people who put ristriction of time and space on learning. Therefore, we should also not restrict the effort to find the perfect enviornment to enable successful learning to take place—the SMART learning environment. The notion of smart learning environment evolves in line with the needs and development of the society.

**WHY CAN’T I MAKE MY STUDENTS LEARN?**

Making students learn what we teach is the goal of every teachers. However, achieving this goal is a struggle in itself. “Why can’t my students learn the materials being taught?” a teacher once complained. “I have tried many strategies to make them learn—organizing the learning activities from easy to challenging, providing examples to illustrate a concept, giving assignments, tests, even games and songs, but all is in vain. Perhaps, the teacher haven’t heard what John Dewey said about smart learning: “You cannot teach today the same way you did yesterday to prepare students for tomorrow.” What does it mean? What’s missing here? The problem may not lie on the choice of teaching techniques or activities done in class. The problem may be because we teach the way we learned in our classrooms way back when we were students. This remark may be a direct blow to many teachers trying to set the condition for successful learning. This shocking blow is certainly needed in order to shake us to make a change.

**SMART LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Before we decide the new course of action to take in our pursuit of smart learning enviornment, let’s explore the following notion of smart learning environment.

**“Natural” Learning Enviornment**

In his book “How Gertrude Teaches Her Children”, Pestalozzi proposed the idea that children learn best in their **natural** environment. This idea stresses the dimension of learning from **real life** environment.

What does it mean by the natural or ‘real life environment’? This refers to the ‘real’ environment surrounding the children that stresses the value of **experience**. This idea, which is also supported by John Dewey and Montesorri, highlights the urgent need to go back to ‘nature’ to make learning successful. Many studies and experiments being conducted recently have also confirmed that learning is best conducted when integrated with the natural or real life environment. So, what’s the ‘real life’ or ‘natural’ environment of our students?

Let’s take the millenial generation for example. What is their ‘natural’ learning environment? TV, Ipad, Computers, Wifi, the Internet? You’re right, these devices may suddenly pop up in our minds. “But, they are dangerous to our students”, you may protested. You may be right. If these devices are used unwisely and irresponsibly they can be a bad master; on the other hand, when used wisely and responsibly, they can be a wonderful servant (adapted from Christian Lous Lange’s quote with a little twist).

“My teachers didn’t heavily depend on the use of technology when they taught me and I was still able to learn,” there goes your argument again. Hmm... yes... that’s probably true in your ‘natural context’ in your time. But, we are not in your time any more, the “nature” has changed.

 “If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday, we rob them of their tomorrow.” (John Dewey)

What John Dewey was trying to say is teach students for their tomorrow, not for our present.

This interpretation brings us to an exciting discussion about technology enhanced learning or I prefer to call it “Technology transformed learning”.

**TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMED LEARNING**

Learning and Learning environments have greatly changed in the past decades. The game changer is the emerging power of smart technology, both hardware and software. However, the vast majority of teachers still don’t know how to optimally benefit from this technology. Many still use the technology in close resemblance to the conventional ways of making students learn – recording lectures and putting them into digital forms on learning management system, putting text-heavy lecture notes on powerpoint, and unauthentic multiple-choice e-assessments. Many teachers use technology mainly to “move” the traditional teaching into digital forms, not to “transform” learning and learning environment.

Today, learners ‘*zaman now*’ or the millenial learners, use the digital technology very differently than us (their teachers), as technology and mobile gadgets and applications have been their primary source of learning, socializing and even living.

So, now it is critical that we, the teachers, learn how our students, the millenial generation, use technology in real life environments that are relevant and engaging. In so doing, we can place the learners at the driver’s seat of their own learning venture.

**CREATING ‘SMART LEARNING ENVIRONMENT’ USING TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMED LEARNING**

We really want to make our students learn for their tomorrow, to make them future-ready. There are many things we don’t know about the future, but some are becoming clear.

1. Learning through teaching and sharing

In the conventional learning environment (CLE), students simply learn specific knowledge or skills from the teacher. However, in smart learning environment (SLE), teachers go beyond helping their students learn to helping their students benefit from their learning.

For example: Students can work in groups to select and teach a topic (within the theme of the lesson) to other groups of students in the most interesting way using technology. Teacher can facilitate the students to learn what they have to teach and to organize the information they are going to teach to their fellow students.

1. Learning through researching

In CLE, students learn the knowlege or skills. In SLE, students learn from researching the information or skills.

For example: Provide students with some guided research questions to research information using e-resources about a certain topic or issue. They can then present the result of their ‘research’ to the class.

1. Learning in an integrated way

In CLE, students learn fragmented informaton or subject. In SLE, students learn in an integrated way across subjects.

For example: Assign a **photo hunting** using their mobile phone that captures a problem in the society (e.g. traffic jam, pollution, poverty). Then, ask them to see various facets of the issue (social facet, financial facet, etc).

1. Learning with a REAL purpose

In CLE, students submit their tasks or assignments for the purpose of being graded by their teachers. In SLE, students ‘publish’ their tasks or assignments to benefit a wider and real audience.

For example: We can assign students to do assignments or tasks not just for the purpose of grading their work but going beyond that to **publish** their ‘master piece’ on line (e.g. in blogs, social media).

1. Balancing individual and group success

In CLE, students learn for individual success, but in SLE we can encourage students to go beyond individual success to group or social success.

For example: Rather than giving a multiple-choice test for individual grading in their final examination, we can encourage students to display their mastery of the lessons in a group assignment such as **video recording project**.

CONCLUSION

Whether we like it or not, technology is here and has become the game changer of the way our students learn and live. To help them learn successfully, we need to make their learning as ‘natural’ as possible by creating SMART learning environments using technology that transform learning into living.

November 15, 2017

**REFERENCES**

1. Dewey, John, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education, New York: Free Press, 1916. Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Education>, accessed on November 14, 2017.
2. Gnanakan, Ken, Integrated Learning, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2011.
3. Pestalozzi, Johann Heinrich, (1898). How Gertrude Teaches Her Children: An Attempt to Help Mothers to Teach Their Chidlren and an Account of the Method, a report to the society of the Friends of Education, C.W. Bardeen: Burgdorf, recently reprinted by Quantum Reprints, USA.
4. Singh, Abtar Darsham, and Moustafa Hassan, In Pursuit of Smart Learning Environments for the 21st Century, UNESCO International Bureau of Education, July 2017, accessed from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002523/252335E.pdf>, November 14, 2017, 23.10.
5. Fisher, Kenn, University of Melbourne, Australia, Technology-enabled Active Learning Environments: An Appraisal, OECD 2010, CELE Exchange 2010/7, OECD.org, accessed from <http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/centreforeffectivelearningenvironmentscele/45565315.pdf>, November 7, 2017, 11:30.
6. Elmes, John, Six Significant Challenges of Technology in Higher Education 2017, accessed from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/six-significant-challenges-technology-higher-education-2017#survey-answer>, November 7, 2017. 15:10