
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



The Classroom of Life

Not too long ago I learned to tweet. I sent 12 messages in my fledging month of tweeting – six of them on the first day. To say I was excited to be moving at the speed of our students would be an understatement. By the end of the month I felt like a veteran tweeter.

Then I was hacked.

It turned out the hacker was timid and attempted only the feeblest, “Hello, Prez,” before I took control and foiled any future hacking plans. It goes without saying that our digital lives require daily diligence – but I took away a few more lessons from the hacker, as well.

Of course this sent me back to the drawing board to evaluate my tweeting practices. I started second-guessing my decision to tweet. I wondered if this virtual world was a place I really wanted to go. Then I enlisted the aid of an ESU student.

Rachel Marshall is a senior from Kansas City, Kan. majoring in communication and like most college students today, Rachel is what we call a digital native. The rest of us who grew up with rotary phones or dial-up Internet are immigrants to this virtual landscape. Rachel has taught me how to be a savvy tweeter and a more discerning follower. I can even add a miniaturized Hornet to my tweets these days.

What I have also learned from our students is that our digital lives will continue to challenge everything from how we learn to how we communicate to how we consume news and entertainment. And we will likely have many starts and stops along the way - sometimes at the hands of a hacker but more often at our own trepidations with this fast-moving and unknown landscape.

Technology is the great disrupter of the status quo and currently, mobile is king. Increasingly our students expect to access their courses and their professors from anywhere, anytime, on any device. And our faculty is quickly catching up with the mobile generation.

Rob Gibson, our Chief Information Officer, told me recently, “We are moving into an increasingly agile environment where primary, secondary, and higher education

will need to engage the students with whatever platform walks through the door.”

Rob is referring to the idea of BYOD, bring-your-own-device, and it is no longer a place in the future. It is now.

Driving our classroom technologies at ESU, is a program called Blackboard, Inc. I like the thought of an old-school blackboard hanging in the virtual cloud. Our Blackboard holds all of our courses ready to be shared with students anywhere on Earth and using any type of device.

But more importantly, just like the classroom blackboards of ole, this virtual Blackboard is just a starting place to begin lively conversations among students in the class and with the instructor. Of course the students could be anywhere in the world and each bringing perspectives from the classroom of life. And that is the key – technologies will come, go, and improve but they are simply tools that keep us connected, communicating, and moving forward.

The first president of ESU, Lyman Kellogg, held the first class in 1865 with a few borrowed benches, a Bible, and a blackboard. I often think of his blackboard and my Blackboard and the distance we have traveled. I suppose his Twitter must have been a postcard – they hold about 140 characters. I don’t know if any of his correspondence was erroneously lifted but I doubt he would have hung up his fountain pen at the hands of a hacker.

Since those early days of tweeting, I’ve sent out over 500 tweets about student accomplishments, faculty honors, and community news. More importantly, however, I’ve read thousands more filled with hope, optimism, and great ideas for connecting our classrooms to the world. You can reach me @esuPres.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
