
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Moving at the Speed of Students

What if I told you I could make an ordinary postcard come to life just by waving my smart phone over it like a magic wand? Are you the sort of person who has the capacity to believe in incredible things or might you think I'd hired Penn and Teller to create this trickery?

The technology is called Augmented Reality, and it can animate any piece of printed material. The idea is not to mediate reality, but to enhance it — to make an immediate and personal connection between you and your world.

I think the best technology is the technology that reinforces our relationships. And you might be surprised to learn our students think so, too. Earlier this year, when we at the university pondered the implications of animating postcards through Augmented Reality, our students lobbied to keep these live messages personal, instead of institutional. They did not want them to show snippets of campus life or lectures or fancy 360-degree tours.

They wanted people.

Emmy Edie, a graduate student from Florida studying Industrial Design and Technology, led the charge to keep our technology personal.

"I thought we ought to be bold and unexpected with the Augmented Reality but not lose the personal connection to Emporia State."

Shelby Smith, a junior from Kansas City, Mo., studying Athletic Training told us, "When the postcard comes to life on my phone, I want to see a face and say to myself, 'Hey, that could be my new friend on campus.'"

I couldn't say it any better. We're in the relationship business, all of us.

It was this need for fast personal communication that prompted Samuel Morse to invent the telegraph (away on business, it had taken days for him to learn news of his wife's illness and eventual death). When Morse demonstrated his device, by sending the first electronic message at virtually

the speed of light from Baltimore to Washington in 1844, those in attendance must have been in awe of this seemingly magical technology — sort of like I am with the postcards that come to life with a wave of my cell phone.

Morse — with the help of assistant, Alfred Vail — changed the world.

The telegraph arrived in Kansas Territory in 1858 with the construction of a line from Wyandotte north through Fort Leavenworth and on to Atchison by 1859. That line eventually connected to Omaha and was known as Telegraph Road — an important link in the transcontinental Western Union line.

It is interesting to note that both the telegraph and the Pony Express were crossing into Kansas Territory at nearly the same point in time and intersecting geographically as well, in the northeast quadrant of our state. A Pony Express station was established in 1860 on the Nebraska border in Kansas Territory at Hollenberg, near the town of Hanover — a stop along the Oregon Trail.

Ultimately, the telegraph put an end to the Pony Express in Kansas, coming on the eve of statehood and the establishment of state colleges and universities. I often think about early pioneers in education and how advances in communication played a role in their work and the lives of their students.

The unending expansion of new technologies will continue to create new frontiers. What we do with those frontiers is up to us. I think the best way to begin is with a smile and a handshake — and perhaps a magical postcard.

If you'd like one of these postcards, let me send you one. Just send your address to adastra@emporia.edu.

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