



“The Tech Trek: Grand Blanc’s Journey into the Future.”

Volume V: Grand Blanc High School

Day to day life at a high school looks quite different in many ways from day to day life at an elementary or even middle school. In many ways. However, when it comes to technology at Grand Blanc High School and the new 1:1 devices, the similarities abound. Teachers are still testing the tech waters at their own pace and within the limits of their subjects. While some, like social studies teacher Todd Babiasz, are diving right in, others are being more conservative about their class’ exposure to the new technology (and for good reason!).

Mr. Babiasz teaches various social studies courses at the high school’s West campus. Looking around his classroom, he remarks on how 19 years ago when he became a teacher, he never would have imagined his classroom would someday look like it does now. Besides the impressive artwork crowding the walls (gifts from the students), there are Chromebooks sitting unopened on each desk, waiting for the next group of students to utilize.

As we talk, Mr. Babiasz tells me how it came about that the social studies department has their own devices that stay in the classroom. Right now, most of the high school still rents out Chromebook carts for the day and only a handful of classes have 1:1 devices that students take home as part of the pilot. However, thanks in large part to teacher Marie Baumeister and the technology bond, each social studies classroom has their own cart of devices that stay in the classroom. As the story goes, several years ago Marie Baumeister wanted to use Chromebooks for her World History class. After a very successful pilot, interest was piqued throughout the department. Around the same time, curriculum studies for core classes were up and Mr. Babiasz had the thought that if the Chromebooks went well for Marie’s World History class, why not continue that experience for sophomore and juniors in US History, Government, and Economics. So those classes all transitioned to new curriculum materials that were more web based and student centered. After being granted 6 more carts by the Academic Curriculum Council and having those 6 carts prove to be extremely beneficial in instruction, the social studies department requested several more; however there was a pause in budgeting. When the bond passed, there was room in the budget to provide those additional carts and in the words of Mr. Babiasz, “the stars lined up.”

The Chromebooks have really stretched the teachers and the students, challenging them to do different and innovative things within the classroom. According to Mr. Babiasz, the students have really responded in a positive way and so have the teachers: “Having a Chromebook, I think the technology with the kids in class allows us to look at lesson plans that maybe we’ve done well in the past and now that we have this tool, how can we change it and adapt. Not scrap the whole thing, because what we have is good, but really freshen us up in terms of getting out of our comfort zone and relook at something. How can we take advantage of the technology? So I think the nice thing is while it’s inspired new lessons and new ideas, it’s also taken the things that we’ve had success with in the past and given

us a new lens to look at. That's been exciting to do; it's kind of been like spring all year long for lesson plans."

Mr. Babiasz has big hopes for next year when all high school students will be receiving the 1:1 devices. He sees the social studies department as a resource for all the other teachers at the high school to take advantage of; what works well, what was a train wreck, what students really like, and to inspire others with the amazing things that the students have been doing.

While this resource will be available to everyone at the high school, there may be some subjects where the new technology won't be as applicable- and for a good reason.

Lia O'Toole teaches Algebra, Honors Geometry and AP Calculus at the East campus. She originally was signed up for the 1:1 pilot because she was teaching probability and stats and she was excited to use the Chromebooks for the prob/stats research project. However, as luck of the draw would have it, she ended up not teaching that class this year and was left wondering what the Chromebooks would be used for in her class. While her students use the Chromebooks in other classes, Mrs. O'Toole has found it difficult to find multiple uses in math AND THAT MAKES PERFECT SENSE! Think about it: as we learn math throughout grade levels, we learn steps. Processes. Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally (Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction). These steps are what ultimately lead us to an answer. However, sometimes the answers are wrong even when all the steps are right. Maybe something gets punched into a calculator wrong, maybe a 1 isn't carried; when it comes to math, there are any number of things that can go wrong and lead to an incorrect answer. So generally, math is graded on more than just the ending answer with points being awarded based on accurate steps and logic. So why doesn't a Chromebook work for this?



Students in Lia O'Toole's Algebra class have the opportunity to use either their Chromebooks or paper and pencil for working on their math facts (algebraic equations that can be solved without a calculator).

It might for algebra. Certainly for mental math or practicing math facts, but can you imagine trying to do geometry on a Chromebook and show your work? There might be programs out there that can accomplish this and a teacher could spend time outside of class learning these programs. Then you've also got to teach the students the programs, which can only be done in class and now you're teaching programs and not math. During a math class.

Mrs. O'Toole is working with a student teacher this year, Alec Mihm. Mr. Mihm brings some interesting experiences with him to the class. Namely, he has worked in a school district that has technology coming out of its ears. And nose. The end result in math class? Students were learning the programs and how to manipulate the programs to get the answer. They weren't learning the math. They were overwhelmed with technology and they were learning how to beat the systems.

While both Mrs. O'Toole and Mr. Mihm will openly admit they don't like grading every single problem and checking work, they both easily agree that they'd rather see the work the students do than just give them points based on a final answer. "You need to see their thought process so that you know what misconceptions need to be cleared up, what things need to be re-taught, what things we've mastered. So if it came down to what I'm going to put my energy into- am I going to put all my energy into putting my tests and quizzes online? No. As tedious as grading is, I need to do the grading to get a good idea of what's going on. There are certainly certain things that we can use the technology for, but I don't see it as a transformative thing in my instruction unless it's for a particular class that really lends itself to it."

So does technology make classroom teaching easier? Sure! But easier doesn't always mean better. As Mr. Mihm remarked, "You could make it a lot simpler with multiple choice on the Chromebook. You'd just have to click and it'd make it a lot simpler for you, but that'd be like giving everyone a standardized test every day. Multiple choice and math don't mix."

While there is still deliberation and an understanding of appropriateness from teachers based on subject content, the new technology is being utilized to its potential in many classes. Mr. Babiasz's social studies class has discovered many applicable uses for the 1:1 Chromebooks, including assessments, games, videos, etc.: "I have 32 little researchers at my fingertips. The other day we were talking about the bounty on Harriet Tubman and she had a \$12,000 bounty on her head and we were trying to put it in perspective of how much twelve thousand would be today compared to the 1800s and boom, a kid came up with a number and it's like, wow, that's significant. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, that really was a huge bounty and to have that Chromebook right there to have that spot on research, it allows them to dig a little deeper when they're curious."

In addition to research on Chromebooks, Mr. Babiasz utilizes all forms of technology in his classroom, including cell phones. After taking online quizzes or tests, students have the opportunity to text their parents with their score, sharing a good grade and creating a proud moment. Creating opportunities for connections is something that Mr. Babiasz sees as being vital in the classroom instruction, especially with the new technology: "I think crafting assignments that force collaboration is a big thing- your device is out there but what kind of questions are you asking? Maybe question number three is "Ask your neighbor what picture they found and have them describe it to you." You can incorporate other people within your assignments to create that environment. It is on us to create those interactions and build those things."

As we were finishing up, I asked Mr. Babiasz if there was anything else he'd like me to include. After a moment of silence, he replied, "I guess the biggest thing is just that we're so appreciative to the community. What this bond has done is given a lot of people that energy again. Seeing our community

support our school district and knowing that they're spending a lot of money over the course of this bond; we're conscious of that and we want to really be responsible with that." He also gave props to the school district for their patient approach to the technology: "Teachers are not being pressured, they're being inspired and I really like that model of allowing the staff to come to the technology and allowing other staff to inspire with what the kids are doing. I think that's what has borne so much fruit- that the teachers who are using it genuinely made a choice to do it."

Lia O'toole's parting words rang with a similar theme: "There's a happy medium. You need to figure out what works for you as a teacher and for your courses. Decide what's appropriate and make sure there's still rigor in your course and in your assessments and if you can find some way to incorporate the technology to enhance certain aspects of it, then great! But it needs to be done with discretion. You can't just use it for the sake of "we have it, so let's use it" while instruction suffers as a result.

A special thank you goes to teachers Todd Babiasz and Lia O'Toole as well as student teacher Alec Mihm for graciously sharing their time so that Grand Blanc Community Schools can share with you; their community.

These are the volumes of Grand Blanc Community Schools. Its lifelong mission: to explore new concepts, to seek out new learning and new technology, to boldly go where no school has gone before.

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