

Lisa Stringfellow

I was born in 1970, but "digitally" I feel like I was born in 1982. That was the year my family bought our first computer. At ages 10 and 12, my brother and I were so excited to wake up on Christmas morning to a shiny new Commodore 64 computer. My brother and I pulled out the manuals and figured out how to hook it up. We could type and print with the word-processor program, play video games like *Aztec Challenge* and *Pitfall*, and even played around with a weird language called BASIC. My parents just stood back and let us do our thing. I don't know what made them buy it, as I don't recall ever asking for a computer, but it definitely changed the direction of life for me and my brother. Interestingly, we both have ended up in careers with a technology focus. He is a graphic artist and web developer and I am a techno-loving educator!

I don't think I fall into the generation of the digital native, as coined by Marc Prensky, but I also don't like the term digital immigrant with which many older tech users are labeled. As a person who was there at the birth of the personal computing age, I feel more like a digital pioneer than anything else. Hopefully, I am also a model for my students of the "digital wisdom" that Prensky sees as the next step in our technological progress. In my work and teaching I have tried to model good digital citizenship and awareness of intellectual property, as well as a common-sense balance of technology use.

After my early introduction to the personal computer, my technology journey continued through high school where I took computer science classes. As a freshman at Dartmouth in 1988, I was required to buy my own personal computer and was introduced to the Mac. My compact Mac Plus was easy to use, functional, and customizable. I played around with custom desktop icons and sounds and felt like my computer reflected my personality. As a student, I learned how to use the campus intranet, email and instant messaging applications to communicate. I also started exploring the applications that were available on my computer, like Microsoft Word, and took over responsibility for publishing a weekly newsletter for my campus bible study group. While working on the newsletter with a classmate I remember being asked for the first time, "How did you learn so much about computers?" I shrugged and replied, "I don't know...I just like to play around with things." Oddly, I was asked that question again a few weeks ago by a colleague at school who I was helping set up a blog. My response was the same, "I just like to play around with things."

After I graduated from college in 1992, I did temporary work in several downtown Boston companies that had Windows-based PCs. This was my first experience with that platform and I started to broaden my technical knowledge, while also noticing the similarities between computer platforms.

In 1994, I opened an AOL account and started using the World Wide Web for the first time. At first, I couldn't see what the benefit of the service was, besides email, but I began to discover how much more was available beyond what was stored on my hard drive.

During the same year, I started teaching middle school Language Arts at Kentucky Country Day School. Within a few months, again, people noticed my facility with computers and began coming to me with computer questions. The next year I was given the 5th grade computer class

to teach. In 2000, I was offered the position of Middle School Technology Coordinator. I began thinking about what technology skills kids needed to know and when they needed to learn them. I also began thinking and working on what kind of professional development teachers needed to help them teach these digital skills in their classes. I eventually returned to the classroom, but still am an "unofficial" tech person. I'm not sure why, but I'm often told by my colleagues that things "make sense" when I explain them or that I don't make them "feel dumb." I laugh it off, but I think many teachers have anxiety about technology, especially if it is unfamiliar or new, and having a patient disposition can do a lot to make people feel at ease.

The last year has been the most significant for me in technological thinking and growth. Several significant events happened which changed my perspective about technology and learning. First, I attended the Lausanne Laptop Institute in Memphis, TN last July and was amazed by the ways I saw schools using technology to enhance learning. I was introduced to paperless classrooms, digital portfolios, book trailers, tablet computers, and numerous web tools. I came back from Lausanne with more ideas than I could try in a year, but I picked out a few to pilot in my classroom, most importantly using book trailers to motivate readers and implementing the social network Edmodo with my students.

The book trailer project was very successful and opened several unexpected opportunities. I created a book trailer as a model for my students and was contacted by the author, who saw my post on YouTube. We set up a Skype chat with students who had read the book and they were able to talk to her about writing and the characters in the novel. It was an awesome real-world connection I would not have made before using these new technologies. I also used Edmodo this year and felt that for the first time my teaching hasn't been confined to my classroom or even the 8 am - 3 pm school day. Kids can post homework questions any time and I receive a text notification and can respond to them, even if it's 7 pm. I really feel it has taken down the walls of my classroom.

Another important event of the past year was that I bought an iPhone and an iPad. I have bought many gadgets over the years, but these two devices are the first that I feel have changed how I work and teach. I feel like my knowledge has expanded, not just because of the devices and how I use them, but because of the information to which I now I feel connected. I bookmark dozens of web pages weekly on Diigo. I email and share information with others daily. I have found creative ways to publish content quickly. For example, all of the teachers working at my school's camp this summer happen to have iPhones. I introduced them to the Bump app for sharing pictures. We all take pictures of activities during the week and they Bump them to me. I use the Animoto app to produce a video every Friday. All of these things happen so quickly and with such facility I feel because of these devices. These are things that I did on my laptop to some extent, but having the mobile technology has made me feel connected everywhere.

Presently, I am interested in mobile learning and using online technology to facilitate communication. I have read a lot about virtual meeting spaces and could see using a program like Second Life to have virtual class meetings on snow days. I am learning about the power of developing a PLN and have begun using Twitter to develop connections with other educators. I find it amazing that last July I didn't even know what a "hashtag" was and now I participating in Twitter chats like #elemchat and #5thchat almost weekly.

When I took the *The Pew Internet and American Life Project* quiz on "What Kind of Tech User Are You?" my results were a "Digital Collaborator."

## What Kind of Tech User Are You?

[Email](#) | [Share](#) | [Print](#)

### You are an Digital Collaborator

If you are a Digital Collaborator, you use information technology to work with and share your creations with others. You are enthusiastic about how ICTs help you connect with others and confident in your ability to manage digital devices and information. For you, the digital commons can be a camp, a lab, or a theater group – places to gather with others to develop something new.

I actually agree with this assessment. I think I have always had a love of collaboration and it has only been in the past few years that I have realized the power of digital and social media to creatively work with others.

All of my experience leads me to believe I am going in the right direction to best meet the needs of my students. I do worry about some of the discussions, like in *Digital Nation*, about technology becoming a distraction rather than an benefit, but I feel it is something that can be managed with engaging and student-centered learning. Ideally, the technology should eventually become invisible, a tool we take for granted in working through the process of learning.

I have started a blog to reflect on my teaching practice and share ideas with other educators. Inspired by teachers like Vivian Paley, I hope to think about the process of learning that I see in my classroom and share what has worked with my groups of learners with others. I think that there are limits to the autobiographical inquiry model, yet, I also think there is much that can be learned from this form of sharing. It is validating to read something on a blog or Twitter chat and know that what you are seeing is the same as another teacher and that your ideas strike chords with others. I think there is power in those kinds of interactions. The Internet allows us opportunities for broad community gatherings and for meeting people outside of the limitations of geography. There are a wealth of great educator blogs on the web and I'm just starting, but I hope to make a valuable contribution with this form of inquiry.