Edtech and Social Emotional Learning

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Vicki: Yes, you can use Ed Tech and Social Emotional Learning!

Dr. Michelle Zimmerman @mrzphd is with us today.

Her original research went into the design of Renton Preparatory in Seattle, which was a 2016 Top Three STEM School in the nation.

Michelle, you've done some fantastic work with Social Emotional Learning and Ed Tech. I guess the first thing that brought me to you is that you've actually seen that Minecraft can help improve social emotional learning outcomes? What's the deal with that?

Michelle: It's really interesting, seeing what can happen when you use gaming as a vehicle instead of just as looking at gaming for an increase in test scores for a certain content level. Kids are already motivated to use and play Minecraft on their own, and already start naturally collaborating with other kids.

If you take that learning and harness it as an educator, and then figure out the kinds of questions to ask, how to really reinforce those types of positive interactions -- over technological devices, and questions, collaborating, being able to be creative with each other -- you can start building in social emotional learning with those kids in the classroom.

One of the ways that is really fascinating to see that happen is when you're having older kids work with younger kids in a cross-age mentoring model. It gives them a chance to start teaching someone else. And when you become a teacher, you learn things in a way that you didn't as a student. You start questioning perspectives, and developing something called Theory of Mind, realizing that other people think differently than you do. That can be really powerful in helping harness social emotional learning to realize how your actions impact someone else.

Vicki: So, what kind of changes did you see in the kids as they played and used Minecraft in this way?

Michelle: One of the things that I noticed was that when someone has an idea of building something or creating something they have one perspective. They imagine that other people see it in the same way that they do. When they start working with a younger child, who has questions that they may not have

foreseen, it gets them to start questioning things from their own perspective of "How can I see this content in a different way?" or "How can I help them understand?" This deepens their own thought process. It also starts building a relational connection with that younger buddy, and when they have that relational connection, they're more motivated to persist when things get difficult.

As we know as teachers, it gets challenging, trying to teach someone else, because not everyone understands things right away the first time. But being able to have that compassionate empathy, start building that connection?

There's a theory of motivation that's called self-determination theory, and it looks at three innate psychological needs that humans have. One of them is relatedness. One of them is a feeling of being competent. Another one is a feeling of autonomy – that you have some choice.

Minecraft allows kids to interact at all those levels, especially when they're doing something with a cross-age mentoring. They build a related connection with someone else. They have a sense of autonomy and choice in how they go about building or creating or explaining and describing. Then they have a feeling of accomplishment in being competent in something and having more experience than another child when they're mentoring.

Vicki: Last night I was watching "To Kill a Mockingbird." I try to watch it at least once a year. And one of the beautiful things in that story is how Scout learns to see the world through someone else's eyes. And that's really, I've noticed, when my kids play Minecraft, when my kids do multi-age mentoring, they think differently. They become more empathetic. They become better communicators. Have you seen some other edtech tools besides Minecraft that can have this kind of social emotional impact?

Michelle: Interestingly enough, something as simple as digital inking can have that impact.

I did a study, several years back about some of the older children working with younger children, (pre-kindergarten), just very basic digital inking, starting with colors and talking to 3 and 4 year olds about their favorite colors, showing them how to use the tool.

It worked really well with kids who were English language learners who weren't really talking in class. But their teacher realized that one girl in particular understood more English than she was articulating.

Pairing her with an older girl in sixth grade at that time – one who wasn't one who was really excited about turning in homework or engaging other classroom content – really worked well with this girl. She started talking to her about colors, having her repeat back, getting her to gradually articulate things, and being able to use the recording device on the computer with the digital inking, show the progression and this interaction between these two kids.

It was incredibly dynamic. By the end of the school year, we had a series of recordings that the sixth grader captured – from the very beginning -- digital ink colors -- all the way through the girl drawing Early Literacy words, invented spellings, pictures on the screen, and telling a full story about a princess. Being able to have that early literacy foundation as an English Language Learner, but even more, it caught the dynamic interaction of that sixth grade girl who didn't really show a high aptitude on test taking, but (she had an) amazing depth in the way that she interacted with this younger girl over digital ink.

Vicki: Cool. And were you using OneNote for the digital inking experience?

Michelle: Yes.

Vicki: Cool! And that's such a fantastic tool. We've had shows on that before. I'll put the links in the show notes.

So, I have a question. You know, a lot of people say that technology is actually hurting social emotional learning. What are the mistakes that educators and parents are making that you think might actually hurt social emotional learning?

Michelle: That's a great question, because any type of technology, any type of game can either be used in a positive way or it can become destructive very quickly. Even technology – computers in the classroom – can. It can be destructive in getting kids distracted, there can be cyberbullying, there can be emotional impact on kids feeling isolated or left out in groups that are collaborative.

One of the things that I think that teachers make a mistake of is assuming that technology will take the lead. Then if you just follow that and allow the kids to jump in -- because they're "digital natives" and they're going to automatically know how to interact with technology and with each other.

But there are studies that have been showing up that [indicate that] even if you've gotten kids to be able to dialogue and converse in person, and work through some of those differences, that same dialogue doesn't work the same when it's over a technological device.

So, one of the most important things that I noticed is – teachers [need to] really intentionally use those as positive examples, and find those students who are effectively using technology to build others up and then model it themselves.

It's one of the benefits of using social media as teachers – to say "These are positive ways that you can use social media," and then have those students model and practice it… as opposed to saying, "Don't do this," or "Don't do that," because that leaves them with the gap of "What should I do, then?"

Vicki: So, Michelle, you're SO speaking my language. I use a term – I don't know where it came from, but I wrote about it in *Flattening Classrooms, Engaging Minds* called Technopersonal Skills.

Interpersonal is when you're face to face, but Technopersonal is when you're communicating with another person but technology is in between. And you really do have to teach someone how to use technology to communicate, don't you?

Michelle: Exactly. And I found that out the year that I started doing research in the (use of) Portal in the classroom. That turned into a four-year research study in the classroom. It was FASCINATING, because I assumed that this group of kids knew how to play Portal already, or first person perspective games.

And as soon as I had them start to collaborate, this group of kids that were amazing at discussions – their communication broke down immediately. (laughs)

It completely surprised me! I had debrief sessions with the kids, and I said, "What do you think happened there?"

Some of the kids who were most adept at playing the game had the hardest time articulating, because they

knew what they were going to do. They knew their perspective and direction.

We see that with adult educators, too, who are really well versed in their content area – anywhere from early childhood to college instructors.

It's this inability to remember what it was like to try and start those things on your own. That's where some of the communication breakdown started to happen with the kids, just like it does with teachers.

It's this feeling of "How come you can't get this?" or a frustration with they couldn't get their partner to be able to do the same things that they knew how to do really well.

So we went through that process of, "Well, what does it mean to have conversations over a game?" and instead of just going, "No! Over there! Ahhh! Ahhh!" or "No! No! No!"

What can you say instead, or how can you point or describe the object that you're seeing if they can't see it? And that started building perspective taking.

Vicki: Wow. Teachers we have so much to dive into.

But as we have blended learning environments, as we bring games into the classroom, I think that it's just real important for us to understand that there are positive ways for us to use all of these tools to improve social emotional learning with technology.

But there's a pedagogy, and we need to get involved in that and understand it. One way you can do that is to check the show notes.

Follow Dr. Michelle Zimmerman. Her work is fantastic, and her school's doing amazing things. It's very exciting to see what she's doing and to apply that in our own classrooms.

Michelle: Thank you for having me here.

Transcribed by [Kymberli Mulford](#)