My Journey: Reflections and Cross Cultural Experience with Technology

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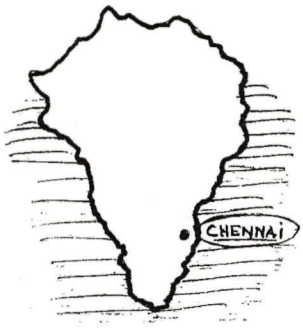
This narrative describes the author's experiences with technology: from learning how to use email, to becoming proficient in programming, and eventually moving to a paperless classroom. She describes how social work students are making computers part of their educational experience.



My personal interaction with computer technology was "none" when I graduated with an M.A. in Social Work in India in 1989. Computers did not invade mainstream society in India until the early part of the 1990s. At the time, computer centers that offered personal tutoring in computer software and programming languages were beginning. Students from computer disciplines had access to computer labs, but students from other disciplines had no exposure to computers until they completed their higher education. In 1992, I used computers for the first time at the U.S. Consulate Library at Chennai, which was several hundred miles away from my hometown.

My journey in technology began later in 1992 when I came to the United States of America. I was excited about the use of computers for searching library materials and retrieving journal abstracts. The ability to find materials quickly using computers increased my enthusiasm and energy level.

When I used the computers as a graduate student at Barry University in Florida, the lab policy was that prior experience in computers was needed. I took the policy very seriously and enrolled in a computer course for beginners, which introduced me to the use of word processing software. I marveled at the speed at which the instructor taught the word processing software. Even though I do not remember what I learned in that class, I did learn something. I felt that the course was introduced as aversion therapy for someone who had no prior knowledge in computers.

I did not develop a passion for computers when I first began graduate school and I primarily used computers to type my term papers and to search library materials. On the day I was about to submit my first term paper for a research method course in my Ph.D. program, I lost more than half of the paper because of a corrupted disk. It was a disaster. Luckily, I had a printout of my paper, so I was able to type the pages within a couple of hours, make final changes and submit my paper on time. My frustration with computer technology had begun.

Due to our increasing phone bills, my brothers dragged me into using email by sending email messages to me from India and from the Northeast part of the U.S. Becoming proficient with the use of email, I had received more than a two hundred messages from my brothers by the end of my Ph.D. program in 1994. I thrived in this new land, partly due to text-based support consistently offered by my brothers. Although almost all of

my family members have access to email, email has not replaced our family's need for face-to-face meetings or telephone calls, so actually our phone bills have not been reduced. These days we communicate less frequently via email than ever before due to affordable telephone costs.

As a foreign student, I spent several long weekends without conversing with real people. Therefore, I participated in some email list serves as a means to connect with real people and discuss several issues related to the profession. Computer technology in this new land offered opportunities to stave off boredom, to increase my ability to accomplish tasks easily, and to connect with others. Electronic mail opened up new means of communicating with my brothers instantly using text based phone capabilities.

In 1993, I was introduced to SPSS (mainframe) in one of my research classes. I was comfortable in making and rectifying errors, so I wanted to master SPSS. I volunteered to do data entry for my colleagues and to work with other doctoral students on their dissertations. Working as a research assistant for a homeless enumeration project helped me to sharpen my skills in creating data files and data entry. Due to my comfort level with mainframe, I elected to use SPSS to enter my dissertation data. One of my mentors hired me as a research/teaching assistant for four projects. He was generous in lending me his laptop on several occasions.

During my student years I used SPSS for Windows to assist two Ph.D. students with data management, data entry and statistical analysis. During our exit group interviews, several of my Ph.D. colleagues suggested adding computer literacy as a pre-requisite to enter the program. I disagreed. Due to my computer illiteracy level at the time of entry, I was challenged on several occasions during my first semester. However, I was comfortable from my second semester and was even able to help my colleagues with computers and SPSS.

Computer use eventually emerged as a hobby for me as, I became more adventurous and comfortable in experimenting with several software programs whenever I wanted to take a break from my routine activities. Computers have now become an important part of my life, as I always found something amazing to explore or learn. Even if I do not make a conscious effort to try new applications on my own for a month or two, I get questions from colleagues and students that make me want to learn new software programs to help them.

As a part of my regular exploration, I learned Harvard Graphics and Power Point. When my dissertation chair challenged me, I used these programs to organize my presentation and present my results using the concept-mapping technique. Since I did not have access to a projector, I made colorful transparencies by printing Power Point slides and developed several concept maps to explain my regression results.

In 1995, I went back to India. By this time, computers had permeated the mainstream society. My seven-year-old niece talked about computers and demonstrated her ability to use them on my brother's laptop. I was happy that computers had entered schools in India. Still, because email access had not entered mainstream society, postal offices acted as the central place for the public to send and receive email messages. Companies offered email access to their employees, which is how my brothers were able to email me.

I introduced PowerPoint presentations into my classrooms in 1996 at Northeastern Illinois when I first taught in a computerized "smart" classroom/lab. Although students were impressed with Power Point presentations, a problem arose when they became more involved in taking notes from the slides than participating in classroom

discussions. In other words, my intent to use Power Point in order to engage students actively in the classroom was defeated. I found the Internet to be a valuable media tool in order to come up with a plan to disseminate my handouts without making hardcopies. I posted Power Point slides "as is" by converting them to HTML documents. I used File Transfer Protocol (FTP) to transfer files from my computers to the university server. This was my first introduction to using the Internet in my classrooms. Not wanting to merely place the HTML documents on to the web, I ventured into building my own course websites for the courses I taught from 1996 to 1999, until I found Blackboard in 1999.

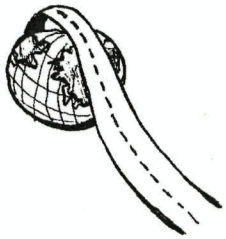
In 1996, I finally bought my own personal computer. Although telephone bills were high when I sought technical support from three siblings that have computer science/ engineering degrees, their assistance and motivation were invaluable. With their help, I could integrate Web supplements in teaching and learning. With no limit I started placing my syllabus, assignments, Power Point slides on the web. When I saw students getting frustrated with printing multiple Power Point slides from my course websites, I found a way to convert the slides into text-based HTML pages, which reduced the amount of pages to print to two or three. I worked on these web developments on my own time in order to serve students effectively and to develop independent learning environments for the students. Initially, to transmit text based information, I used the web, and to promote communication with the students, I primarily used email. When students became comfortable with the static nature of my websites, I wanted to offer more for them and I started compiling Internet resources related primarily to the courses I taught. I developed SOLE (Social Work Online) through which I provided a link to more than 500 websites related to policy, social welfare, research methods, statistics, and the social work profession. I felt comfortable integrating Internet resources relevant to my courses by accessing them instantly, enabling me to offer virtual tours to several social welfare agencies in the comfort of my own classrooms. Students were delighted to have ready access to several websites on social welfare programs and policies related to their assignments.

In 1997, I designed several online interactive activities. Using programming, I developed CGI forms to enable students to complete assignment sheets online and submit the assignments directly to me. Additionally, I used "Question Mark" software to design exam questions and to administer exams online. Some students were highly panicked by the fact that they were to submit their exams online, and in fact, some students submitted exams more than once. Since the university offered lab assistance, configuring each computer to administer the exam became easy. Some students requested a paper copy of the exam to refer to while taking the computerized exam, which was an interesting strategy to reduce test/computer anxiety.

I also designed online discussion forums for my own students and for the Asian Student Association, using Web Board software. As an administrator of the student forums, I had the ability to determine access privileges. Web Board software offered several possibilities in terms of enabling student access to certain discussion forums and offering read and/or write privileges to the students. For example, I could create a threaded discussion for an assignment, in which students could both ask and respond to the questions. After the due date, I blocked the write privileges, which then enabled students to read the archived discussions without posting new messages. Such capabilities were extremely valuable to moderate and facilitate online discussions.

Using computer applications developed a positive learning environment for students; however, I did not have an opportunity to

compare my work with others as very few have adopted computer technology in my university. In 1997, I attended a summer institute hosted by University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign (UIUC), where the online productions of their faculty were showcased in a sophisticated manner. This showcase helped me do a self-assessment and value the products that I had developed for my students.



When I visited India in 1999, I found tremendous advances in computer technology. There was a mushroom growth of Internet Cafés, where college students spent their time in groups. I used these cafes to do online banking and to send email to my friends, colleagues, and family in the U.S. However, the connection was extremely slow, taking 15 to 30 minutes to access an email and to send one or two messages. I visited my school where I got my M.A. in Social Work and found some technological advances. The school had computers with SPSS to use for research projects, but students had very limited access. My 11-year-old niece talked about learning ORACLE programming at her school. Schools have become competitive by integrating programming languages from middle school onward. To sharpen my skills in web designing and programming, I took some crash courses on programming languages, database administration, and graphic designing.

Using Blackboard software for course management was easy; it cut down my work associated with programming and using several software packages considerably reduced my time spent in designing the online learning environment. Since 2000, I have been using Blackboard software for course management in all research courses where technology is extremely useful and adaptive. With 24-hour high-speed Internet access from home I can offer frequent online consultations and revise student research proposals. Such capabilities enable me to do paperless, digital consultations, which students originally resisted. However, due to their growing technological sophistication, students now prefer digital submissions. Over the past years more than 80 to 90 percent of transactions are paperless, via a digital drop box. Digital transactions enable students to do corrections and to submit and receive papers very quickly, but they do place time pressure on the faculty as the students expect quick turnaround.

In 2002, I again visited India. This time, I used my parents' laptops to check my emails from my own home and used Internet cafés whenever we traveled. Internet access was now easy, simple and fast. Some of my friends and family members had personal computers, which had become affordable and easily available, with Internet connections in their homes. I was impressed to see that the school curriculum from the first grade included beginning concepts about computers as well as computer games. Families used Video CDs to watch movies on their computers and became comfortable with burning music CDs. This time the Internet Cafés were less crowded due to the increase in computers at homes.

In the beginning years, my computer use in the classroom was often met with both fascination and reservations. Now it very rarely intimidates students and several of our new students are extremely technologically savvy. This knowledge has changed several students' attitudes. A student who initially refused to cooperate in using the computer, recently chose me as his thesis advisor. He had honestly expressed his frustration and refused to use the technology for one full

semester, while other students were actively using and producing more than 24,000 hits during a semester. This student said he liked my approach to teaching but did not like technology in the classroom as it intimidated him. However, by the time he was in his final semester, he actively used online media to send his papers and to get my feedback via email or digital drop box. He admitted that his attitude toward computers has changed due to my consistent use. Another student refused to use a computer mouse with her right hand as she heard that the use of it affects the hand. Sometimes, students are preoccupied with the newness of technology. Some students talked more about the technology than the course content, which made me wonder whether I covered the content or taught them about computers.

Computers have become part of my daily life, teaching and life-long learning. I acclimatized to learning the computer technology so that I could function effectively and easily in the new land of opportunities. When I arrived here, I had to adapt quickly and start my school life. Similarly, I have easily made a shift from one computer program to another without any fuss, as my campus jobs did not give me much time. I have become accustomed to newness. This ability to adjust became handy when I used several software programs for web designing and using different versions of SPSS in my classrooms. I feel a responsibility to tell others how much computers have helped me to grow as a professional. My journey with computer technology continues and I view it as an important service to our profession.