**Why I am not interested in “Tech in ECE.”**

by Miss Night on 6 January, 2013

blog post <http://missnightmutters.com/>

home page intro:

***My name is Amy, and I teach kindergarten*…**

**I believe:**

that play should be  a practice in the same way as religion is.

that technology is a tool, nothing less and nothing more.

that if you don’t have a sandbox, you don’t need an iPad.

that if kids aren’t learning the way I teach, I need to teach the way they learn.

**that the world looks better with a vanilla latte in my hand and a little glitter in the air.**

**I work hard every day to keep all my marbles in one jar.**

**Won’t you stay and play awhile?**

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**Why I am not interested in “Tech in ECE.” (**E**arly** C**hildhood** E**ducation)**

This post has been brewing for a long time, bubbling and simmering in my head and heart. Thanks to friends [**@learningmurd**](http://twitter.com/learningmurd) and [**@hechternacht**](http://twitter.com/hechternacht), who read it in advance, and encouraged me to publish, even if it does ruffle a few feathers…

It has diminished somewhat, now, but for a while, on the Twitterz, I had something of a reputation as “She-Who-Tweets-With-Kindergarten” Thanks to some [**very positive media exposure**](http://kindergartenaroundtheworld.blogspot.ca/p/welcome.html), it was widely known that [**I tweet with my class**](http://missnightmutters.com/2011/02/to-tweet-or-not-to-tweet.html). Then, my blog post about [**using Evernote for student portfolios**](http://missnightmutters.com/2011/11/scrapbook-is-not-a-verb-how-to-use-evernote-for-student-portfolios.html) got a fair amount of attention. In addition to that, I myself am very active on Twitter. I co-moderate the [**#kinderchat community**](http://missnightmutters.com/2013/01/www.kinderchat123.net). I run [**Kindergarten Around the World**](http://kindergartenaroundtheworld.blogspot.ca/). I blog right here. Altogether, I manage 4 twitter accounts, 3 blogs, 2 facebook pages,  a pinterest account, and a partridge in a pear tree. I love my iPad and my shiny new iPhone 5 like nobody’s business. I lust after a new MacBook. I own (and proudly wear) an Evernote t-shirt.

OBVIOUSLY, then, I MUST be passionately interested in The Use of Technology In Early Childhood Classrooms, right? Ehrm, actually, no.

I am **very very** *ambivalent* about being perceived as a “techie teacher.” To be utterly completely honest with you, the “tech in ECE” (and, by “ECE” I mean infants thru 3rd grade) conversation is BORING to me. It is tiring. It often feels faintly dirty, as, far too often, the people advocating FOR screen-based technology in ECE/primary classrooms, turn out to have some personal or financial interest in putting tech into those classrooms, while on the other end of the spectrum, the anti-tech people tend to deliberately misrepresent and misunderstand how tech is being used, and construct elaborate criticisms of tools that they themselves do not use and therefore do not understand.  I have often felt like I was being recruited by both sides of this conversation. I have deliberately been non-committal, even downright slippery and evasive, while secretly squirming in discomfort. So here, I’m throwing it all out there — all the random reasons why the “tech in ECE” conversation is not my thing. Maybe sharing them here will help me make sense of them. Maybe this will help move the conversation in a more compelling direction. Or maybe this will just help me feel a little lighter by getting things off my chest.

* I guess the very word “technology” is a good place to start. The word “technology,” in this conversation, is really just a cover for “screen-based technology.” The conversations and debates are never about whether we should use CD players or listening centers or digital cameras or tape recorders or even electric pencil sharpeners (all of which are “technology”). The discussion is ALWAYS about: iPads, iPods, computers, smart-boards. Let’s make no mistake: this is about ***screens***.
* And THEN, because the “tech” conversation is really the “screen-based tech” conversation, the “anti-tech” people get to start talking about the evils of “screen time” as if there is no difference between a 2 year old parked in front of ScoobyDoo for 8 hours a day while the babysitter does her nails, and a 5 year old dictating a tweet that will be sent to (and replied to by) another 5 year old on the other side of the world. And any conversation that requires that many sets of quotation marks to describe is ALREADY exhausting. And boring. And probably futile. I have experienced first-hand how the anti-screentime people don’t want to hear about how an inner city classroom uses a smartboard to go on virtual fieldtrips to the rainforest, or how [**tweeting with friends in Indonesia brought empathy to a whole new level in my classroom**](http://missnightmutters.com/2011/03/i-heard-them-say-love-is-the-way.html). If it happened using a screen, it apparently… doesn’t count? Really?
* All of that being said, if pushed on it, I have to say: I’m just not sure that handheld screen-based tech has a place in classrooms for children under 5. There. I said it. I said “no, thanks” to iPads in the Preschool and Junior Kindergarten classes at my school. Those kiddos have too many things to do with their brains and their bodies and each other to be spending time on a screen while they are at school. I’m also really not sure that putting a device worth several hundred dollars in the hands of 3 year olds is the world’s soundest decision. There, I said it.
* I think that screen-based versions of real-life things are rarely the better option.  The people who sing the praises of these sorts of apps seem to be inordinately focused on the “easy and convenient” factor: No cleanup! Less noise! Easy and convenient is for 7-11, not kindergarten teachers. Maybe I will someday encounter a situation where virtual pattern blocks provide more learning opportunities than the real thing, but until then I prefer real, three-dimensional blocks that kids can touch and move and feel and manipulate.
* As it says in my bio, I believe tech is a tool. Nothing less and nothing more. What’s more, “tech” is a category of tools. Asking “what do you think of technology in ECE?” is like asking “What do you think about writing utensils in ECE?” *Well, um… they are definitely good to have. I like some better than others. Different utensils are better suited to some tasks/age groups/goals than others. Some require adult supervision. Some require specific instruction to use them properly and safely. Some are really not my favorite in kindergarten, but may be great for other age groups. I think there are teachers who are not very thoughtful about which writing utensils are most appropriate/provide the most learning opportunities for their students. Even the ones I don’t LOVE may have their place for a specific child trying to master a specific skill or complete a specific task…* You see? All of these things are true about technology, too. And yet, we do not devote hours of debate to the question of writing utensils. (Sidebar: I can actually get quite worked up about writing utensils in kindergarten, and WHY CRAYONS ARE BETTER THAN MARKERS, but that is another post…) We don’t have conferences about writing utensils. We don’t get pressure from admin to better integrate writing utensils. We don’t have to apply for grants to GET writing utensils. We don’t have to prove why we need them or how they will benefit our students. Writing utensils are not that interesting. To me, tech isn’t, either.
* Also in my bio “if you don’t have a sandbox, you don’t need an iPad.” We have so many bigger fish to fry in this field right now. There are teachers who have had their dolls, blocks, sandboxes, sensory tubs, housekeeping centres, ripped out of their classrooms and replaced by desks and worksheets. There are schools without recess, without daily PE, without any fine arts programs. When and if you are confident that your students are getting adequate play time, exercise, fresh air, interaction, exploration, creative expression, time in nature, sensory stimulation, and rest time, THEN let’s talk about careful, thoughtful, use of screen-based tech. What would happen if, when an administrator offered an iPad to a kindergarten teacher, that teacher asked for $500 worth of toys and books and puppets and puzzles? Or even… a sandbox? $500 will buy A LOT of paint and play dough and dolls and blocks. It will even buy a sandbox.
* And, on the other hand, to borrow from a comment I made earlier today on my friend [**Matt Gomez’s blog**](http://mattbgomez.com/digital-worksheets-apps-have-some-value/): in a program where “play” has been systematically eliminated (and those programs and settings DO exist, let’s make no mistake here), an app or software package that feels like a game to a child might help create some positive associations about school.  Even if that app is “worksheety.” (That is SO my new favorite adjective.) Even if it is dressed up drill & kill. A child who looks forward to SOMETHING about school is always going to be a better learner…. right?
* A lot of the praise-singing for tech in the classroom talks about “sharing with an authentic audience.” I’m really not sure about this one.  I’m not sure that this sharing is truly motivating for kindergarten students. Often, they are far more interested in the process of creating something than they are in the finished product, and I WANT IT THIS WAY. The learning is in THE PROCESS, right? Once the goal becomes the sharing of the product, what happens to the process? When my students DO take an interest in the product, their first question is “Can I take it home?” They want to show Mom and Dad, Sister and Brother, MAYBE Grandma and Grandpa. Sharing students’ work with a global audience is undeniably exciting for teachers, but is it interesting to 5, 6, 7 year olds? Do they even care? Are they more excited by seeing it posted in the classroom or the hallway? By inviting the principal or librarian to come see it? By taking it home and put it on the fridge? Who is the sharing really for? When we ask for #comments4kids, how authentic IS it?
* A global audience is not the same as building global relationships, and we need to be careful not to confuse the two, or to treat them interchangeably. If screen-based technology is helping kids build relationships with others (especially other CHILDREN), and those relationships motivate our students to share their work and learning, I am all on board. Heck, I am more than On Board. I will captain the ship and take [**Kindergarten all the way Around the World**](http://kindergartenaroundtheworld.blogspot.ca/).

There. It’s out there. Part of me is worried that I may have offended some of you with this post. Another part of me says that at least I was pretty even-handed in distributing potentially offensive comments; people on BOTH sides of this conversation could (and likely will) take issue with some of my points. But that’s exactly the thing, isn’t it? There shouldn’t be a question of “sides.” Somehow, on this issue, we hear every question as a criticism. Every mention of a useful app becomes an Endorsement for iPads in All Kindergartens. Jebus Crisco. Just because I like a new kind of Sharpie doesn’t mean I think all teachers everywhere should scrap the crayons.

So, let’s stop. Let’s stop talking about “tech.” Let’s talk about the children we love and ALL the tools we use to reach and teach them.