



**Align Virtual Learning Solutions**

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## **Going Virtual? Swimming with the Fishes**

In his often-cited Kenyon College commencement address David Foster Wallace recounts<sup>1</sup>,



“There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”

Face-to-face instructors are fishes swimming in the waters of technology without realizing it. As with the fishes and the water, this technology is such a stable and pervasive part of the learning environment it has become invisible. Books, blackboards, whiteboards, projectors, and even laptops and tablets simply come with the territory. They’re essential tools for learning that tend to remain in the background unnoticed.

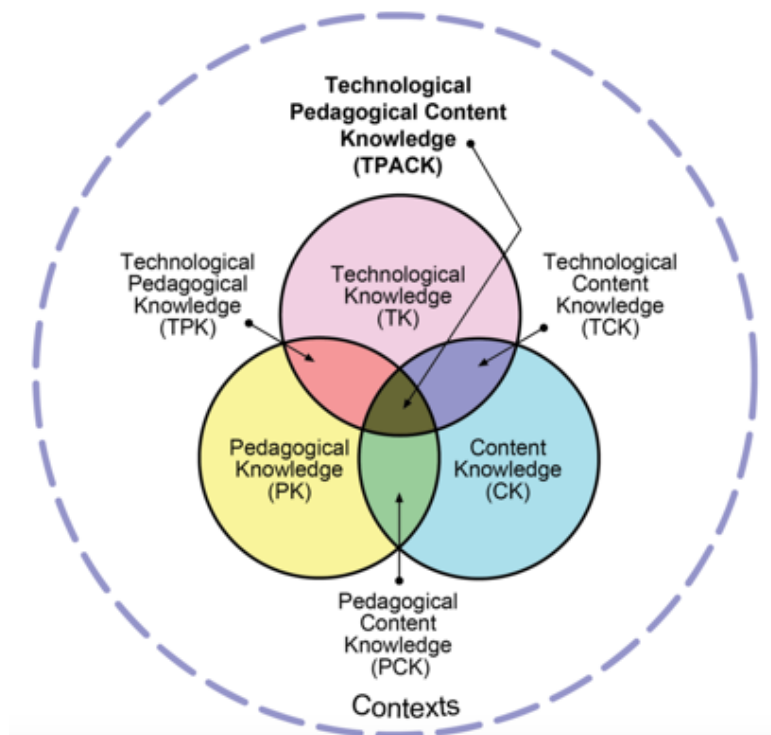
Times are changing. Since the early 90’s the pace of growth in e-learning technology has increased exponentially. This has forced trainers, instructors and students to see technology for what it has always been – an essential variable in the learning equation. Any instructor who has struggled with creating an effective asynchronous online discussion or battled with connectivity or breakout rooms in a synchronous learning environment knows this. Any student who has suffered through a death by PowerPoint webinar experience can speak to its impact.

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<sup>1</sup> See “**This Is Water**: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life,” an essay by David Foster Wallace, first published in book form by Little, Brown and Company in 2009. The text originates from a commencement speech given by Wallace at Kenyon College on May 21, 2005.

Technology is not a “delivery mechanism” for established content and teaching. We can’t pour what we’ve always done in a face-to-face environment into a synchronous virtual classroom and expect success. We can’t ask the same questions or adopt the same evaluation procedures in an asynchronous environment and hope to achieve the same results. What we’ve done in the face-to-face environment presupposed a different, although largely unacknowledged, set of technological tools. But if technology isn’t a “delivery mechanism” what is it? We need a different metaphor that emphasizes its parity with the other elements in the learning equation.

One useful model has come to be known as “TPACK,”<sup>2</sup> an acronym for “technological, pedagogical and content knowledge.” TPACK captures both the **kinds** of knowledge an instructor or trainer needs to create a successful learning environment – pedagogy, content, technology – and, of equal importance, the **relationship** between these elements. A successful instructor needs to know what to teach, how to teach it and the tools that facilitate the process. TPACK’s important realization is learning is a holistic enterprise in which these elements are interconnected in critical ways. This is captured by way of a standard TPACK Venn diagram<sup>3</sup>:



<sup>2</sup> The original version of this acronym, TPCK, was coined by P. Mishra and M.J. Koehler in their seminar paper “Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge: A Framework for Teacher Knowledge” (Teachers College Record Volume 108, Number 6, June 2006, pp. 1017–1054). See [www.tpack.org](http://www.tpack.org) for additional TPACK information and resources.

<sup>3</sup> The image source is <http://tpack.org>

The TPACK approach has the potential to significantly change the way an instructor or facilitator thinks about course construction, student engagement and creating effective learning environments. Foregrounding technology and placing it beside pedagogy and content provides the instructor with a different lens through which to see the educational landscape. Abraham Maslow observed, ““I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”<sup>4</sup> TPACK gives instructors a new tool. In doing so it changes the problems they face as well as the solutions available to solve them.

In the next few posts we’ll view the virtual classroom through the TPACK lens and illustrate the power of this perspective to create more effective virtual learning environments.

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham H. Maslow (1966). *The Psychology of Science*. p. 15.