

# The National Teaching & Learning FORUM



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## TECHPED

### Confessions of an Early Adopter

Tom Creed  
Saint John's University

According to my inside sources, the soon to be released revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V)* will have several new categories of Psychological Disorders. Among these are Monicalalia, the inability to talk about anything other than presidential sex scandals, and the disease which has victimized me— **Early Adopter Syndrome (EAS)**. If you are an early adopter of technology, you know this condition. It's in your blood. And your rating on the *Early Adopter Personality Type Indicator* is every bit as important as your Myers-Briggs type. (See this issue's Virtual Companion at [www.ntlf.com](http://www.ntlf.com).)

#### Development of the Syndrome

At a recent meeting of my local chapter of Early Adopters Anonymous (EAA), I introduced myself as usual ("My name's Tom, and I'm an Early Adopter." "Hi, Tom," everyone answered.) and then I started describing my most recent episode of EAS. As I was talking, I was thinking, "How did I become a technoholic?" I know that new technologies are always crude and full of bugs. I know that software companies

view us early adopters as their private bug detectors. I knew that my most recent binge would eventually result in frustration and wasted effort. But I just couldn't help myself (Symptom #1 of EAS— *lack of impulse control* in the presence of new technologies). I was making the fundamental EAS error—I could imagine the possibilities of the new technology, but discounted how difficult it might be to make it work (Symptom #2— being *in denial* about the psychic costs). I also looked forward to the challenge (Symptom #3— *inability to focus on important variables*. Overcoming a challenge becomes more important than getting tasks accomplished).

Even if you are genetically predisposed to EAS (the gene for EAS, not surprisingly, is, I've been told, located on the Y chromosome), two environmental factors are necessary for it to manifest itself. In my case, my significant other supplies both. First, she frequently tells me that I'm on the cutting edge, making her an *EAS enabler*. Second, we commiserate with each other about how hard we work, making us also *codependent*.

#### The Madness Begins

My most recent bout of EAS started with my foray into continuous speech recognition, which converts voice to text. When I first came across speech recognition software, I was intrigued. Once I

had ordered it, I couldn't wait for it to show up. (Symptom #4—like *love addiction*, anticipation of the next encounter comes to dominate your life, believing it will be the one that finally satisfies.) I could envision taping all of those brilliant class lectures, having the technology turn them into text, and putting them up on my course web site. Better yet, I could collect and publish them. (Symptom #5—when you're in the throes of an episode, your *inner child* is in control, so everything you do is brilliant.) I thought about all of the *Techped* columns I could just say into a microphone, and how I would never again have the typical Bart/Homer Simpsonsque exchange of e-mails I have with James Rhem as my deadline comes due. (Is it done yet? Just a little longer. Is it done yet? Just a little longer. Is it done yet? Just a little longer.)

### Out of Control

Before this newest Nirvana could be realized, I had to install the software, naturally not at school, since my machine there is too slow. But for home, I had just bought a new superfast computer (Symptom #6—your *obsession* comes to be a financial burden). Normally, a program requiring a fast processor should be a warning sign, but I'm in denial, remember? The basic installation was straightforward, but then I had to spend a half hour "training" the software to recognize my voice. Well, I've trained more rats in the lab than I care to admit, so training something makes sense to me. I had a choice between reading three passages as my training text. I chose Dave Barry on computers, since I like his writing. About ten minutes into it, I got a bad case of the giggles. That the program got the wrong idea became abundantly clear when I started "speaking" my first article. One of the cool things about this technology is that the words show up on the screen whenever you add punctuation (Symptom #7—you are more

enthralled with the workings of the technology than with what it actually accomplishes). The first couple of sentences were a laughable collection of English words that probably had a phonetic resemblance to what I had said, but the third sentence was something about "Constantinople." I am certain I hadn't said anything about Constantinople (besides, isn't it Istanbul now?). Looking at the sentence, I had no idea what I had actually said, and obviously my computer had no idea either.

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EASers have a kind of  
pioneer mentality.  
They like being  
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In the next couple of sentences it added "Cuyahoga" and "Dubai," two places I rarely talk about. The biases of the program were becoming evident—it had the wanderlust. I wished I were someplace else, too. I knew at this point that this was going to be a lot more difficult than I had at first thought. If you're wondering why I didn't just quit at this point, you definitely do not understand EAS. But, still *in denial*, I spent more time trying to "train" it to understand how I talk. To understand EAS, you need to understand that EASers have a kind of pioneer mentality. They like being among the first to get there, even when they aren't really sure where *there* is.

### A Cry for Help

EASers are not totally helpless victims. Being a recovering EASer, I knew what to do at this point. In addition to recalling the Twelve Steps of EAA (e.g., "I recognize

## THE NATIONAL TEACHING & LEARNING FORUM

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James Rhem, Ph.D.  
213 Potter St.  
Madison, WI 53715-2050

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### Editorial correspondence:

James Rhem  
213 Potter St.  
Madison, WI 53715-2050

### Subscription information:

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## Editor's Note:

In all things moderation, the Delphic Oracle is supposed to have said. As a youth, I regarded such advice merely as restraint. Older now, it seems more like a means of not getting lost. Balance doesn't mean stasis, as I once thought; it means staying awake to the newness of the moment and finding a way to live it out in ways that make sense with what's already known. Balance is the theme that underlies most of the contributions to this edition of the *Forum*.

In their new book, *Discussion As A Way of Teaching*, **Stephen Brookfield** and **Stephen Preskill** have chapters on keeping both the students' and the teacher's voice in balance, but as the book is subtitled "Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms," balance underlies the whole discussion there as well. Here they offer an excerpt on the teacher's voice. Specific advice and techniques are discussed in a further excerpt subscribers will find posted on our Web site ([www.ntlf.com](http://www.ntlf.com)).

Balance sometimes depends on perspective, something **John Gottcent** offers in his essay on "student bashing." We were all once young and, like as not, seen as the latest evidence of civilization's decline, Gottcent says. Moreover, while we were judging and being judged, we were (and are) largely practicing the same faults. (Some day we'll get it right.) And complementing Gottcent's essay, **Ted Rachofsky** offers another of his quiet epiphanies on what students have to teach us by reminding us of our common humanity and often similar histories.

On the lighter side, the *Forum's* Technology Editor **Tom Creed** surveys the dark side, the painful side, of being an Early Adopter. As a psychologist, Creed understands his addiction, but can't escape its grip. Who'd want him to? It's energetic pioneers like Tom who are revolutionizing teaching by embracing technology with Delphic wisdom—at least in their classes if not on their home computers.

ERIC TRACKS returns with a column by **Frances Sage** reviewing the highlights of research into learning theory and how it is (and might be) applied in the classroom. Again, additional material expanding on what's covered here is posted for subscribers at [www.ntlf.com](http://www.ntlf.com).

Finally, **Paul Berghoff** and a group of faculty friends created a kind of examination of conscience about their teaching. They offer their twenty overlapping questions and invite you to create your own as you ponder answers to theirs.

Remember that the "scholarship of teaching" embraces a wide range of thoughtful writing. Your experience, your reflections on more effective teaching have a place in the conversation. Faculty of all kinds have begun to feel the importance of thinking more concretely about their teaching and writing about it. Insights from one discipline often have cross-disciplinary implications. I encourage subscribers to consider drafting a manuscript for the *Forum*.

Submissions should not exceed 1500 words (six ordinary typed pages), except in extremely unusual circumstances, and should be shorter whenever possible. Submissions in electronic form are highly encouraged. Indeed, submissions through **E-mail** are welcome.

Remember, too, that now with the synergy we have between the printed newsletter and its Web site, we have room for more elaborate presentations, a repository for detailed supplementary material to expand the compact presentations printed here.

Share what you've learned in teaching. Send your manuscripts to the *Forum*.

—James Rhem

that a Power greater than myself—Microsoft—has control over my life.”), I retreated back to a technology that I trust and have mastered. So I clicked on my Word Processor to work on my Techped column. It wouldn't run. My Slick New Toy had corrupted it. (Another sure sign of a technology in its infancy—not only does it not work right, it messes up everything else, too.) Time for a call to the product support folks. Of course, all this happened at 8:05 PM EST, and tech support closes at 8:00 PM. So I sent an e-mail to the company instead. No reply. I tried getting home from work earlier the next night, called at 7:00 PM EST, and was told my wait would be less than two minutes. Yippee! After twenty minutes on hold listening to really annoying Muzak (long distance at my expense—no 800 number), I hung up. Another e-mail. No answer. You get the picture.

## Coming Down

It's days later. I feel more in control again. I'm writing this article with my old word processor rather than either my Slick New Toy or my new word processor that my Slick New Toy ate. I'm done bingeing on my Slick New Toy for the moment, and feel the inner peace that comes from letting go. I may never be totally free of my thirst for voice recognition, but I'm living with it one day at a time.

## Resolution

Perhaps EAS doesn't really exist, but we all do have a tendency to continue to engage in activities long past the point that makes any sense. Widely applicable principles from both behavioral and cognitive psychology can help us understand why this is so.

**THE ENVIRONMENT MADE ME DO IT.** As part of the process of mastering a new technology, you have little victories along the way. These little victories, while unimportant in and of themselves, provide us with a sense of satisfaction. These little victories are

called *generalized conditioned reinforcement*, and generalized conditioned reinforcement turns out to be a very potent controller of our lives. It's why people spend hours working crossword puzzles. Furthermore, you never know quite when you'll have one of these mini-epiphanies, but you do learn that the harder you work, the more you'll get. And therein lies the problem. We psychologists refer to this as a

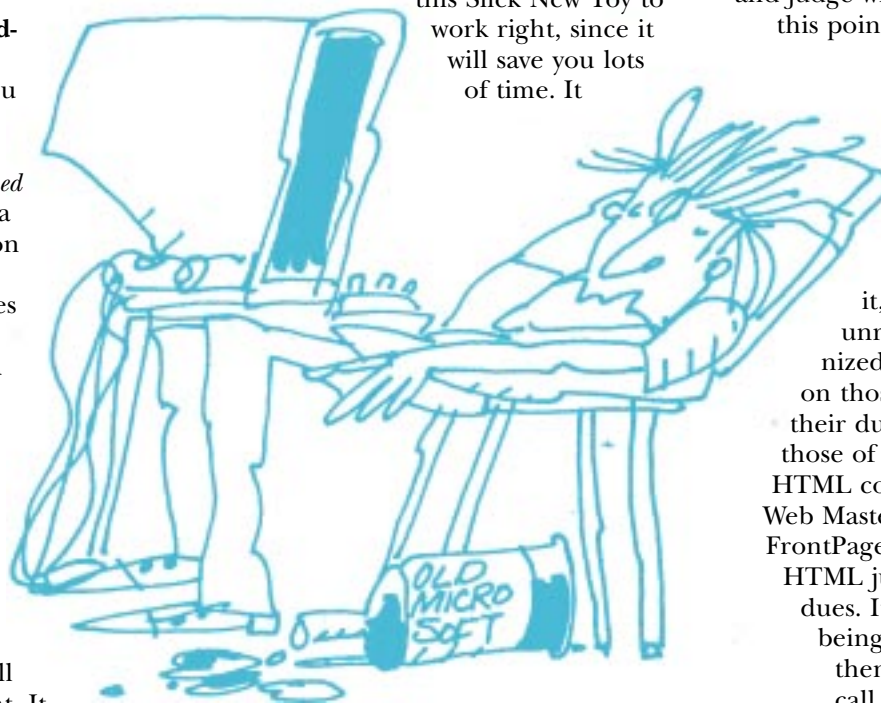
**Variable Ratio schedule of reinforcement**, and when you add that the reinforcement is a *generalized conditioned reinforcer*, you have a very potent situation indeed. This is the same set of variables that leads my mom and my 95 year old grandma to drive like demons across the desert to Nevada to play slot machines. It's the same set of variables that makes evangelical missionaries and people who sell Amway so persistent. It

produces a high rate of activity that will persist, even in the absence of success, for long periods of time—addictive behavior, if you will.

**I'M OK, BUT I'M NOT SO SURE ABOUT YOU.** While behavioral explanations tell us quite a bit about why we do the things we do, cognitive psychology points the way to understanding how persistent behavior can take on a life of its own. At some point, the purpose for the behavior changes. You are no longer doing it for productive reasons, but because you must master it—it becomes a test of wills. This happens when discussions turn into arguments. At some point, an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion turns into a contest to be won.

Paradoxically, persistent behavior becomes problematic when it produces little reward, causing you to experience cognitive dissonance, a sort of mental discomfort, until you change your description of why you did what you did. You're a bright person, but you are continuing to engage in an unproductive act. Smart guys don't fritter away their time.

You've spent lots of time getting this Slick New Toy to work right, since it will save you lots of time. It



hasn't, so you must have frittered away your time, making you a complete idiot. Add to this the fact that early adopters are very often unrewarded by their peers, since it's outside of the traditional faculty roles and rewards, and you have dissonance, big time.

The self-justification that arises from persistent but unrewarded behavior sometimes leads people into a psychological trap, or "the slippery slope problem" (economists refer to it as an "economic sink"). We all have a tendency to commit the fallacy of viewing time spent engaged in an activity as an investment. It's an important part of why we think our teaching methods are best—we've sunk so much into them, we need to justify them. For example, you've spent the summer putting all of your

lectures on PowerPoint. Then you read an article in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* saying that this is a bad idea. What to do? Do you say, I've spent three months doing this, those students are going to see these beautiful slides no matter what, or do you say, "Well, I just wasted three months of my life, but if it's not good for learning, I'll abandon it." It's very difficult to take our loss and judge what makes sense from this point forward.

There's also an ego issue here—for those of us who've really invested in something, especially when it took real effort to learn to do it, yet have been unrewarded or unrecognized for it, we look down on those who haven't paid their dues. For example, those of us who learned HTML coding are the True Web Masters. People who use FrontPage without knowing HTML just haven't paid their dues. It's the ugly side of being a pioneer. It's an us/them thing. Ethologists call it xenophobia. We tend to feel closer to those who are like us, and distrust, even feel hostile towards, those who are different.

As Jeffrey Rubin points out, people who are ambitious, believe that their hard work will eventually pay off, and who don't want to feel foolish are most likely to fall into psychological traps. But as Rubin also points out, sometimes, despite our best efforts, we need to just admit that things didn't work out, take our loss, and figure out a better way of getting our work done. Sometimes the old ways work fine. ■■■

**Contact:**

Tom Creed is Professor of Psychology at Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN 56321. He writes frequently for and is technology editor of *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*. Tom can be reached via e-mail at [tcreed@csbsju.edu](mailto:tcreed@csbsju.edu), and on the web at <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~tcreed/>

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