

Centering Learning with Technology Co-Design Protocol

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The Why

In many schools today, access to technology is no longer the challenge it once was. Devices are in students' hands, digital platforms are embedded into daily instruction, and connectivity is assumed rather than aspirational. The question now facing educators is how best to integrate that technology into lessons in order to improve student learning.

For many schools, the shift to 1:1 devices brings an initial sense of accomplishment. Chicago Vocational, a public high school on Chicago's south side, had tried very hard (twice in fact) to get the Verizon Innovative Learning grant that would provide an internet-enabled device to each of our students. We imagined that having this technology would solve many of our problems: we thought that once we had computers, we could "do school" properly, no longer scrounging for materials or sourcing paper to make copies. If every student had their own device that they could use at home, students could expand their learning beyond the school day. It would give them extra time to research, create, and explore - both topics assigned by teachers and those of their own interests. We were enthralled with planning a huge onboarding and making the announcement to our school community. We had a digital citizenship plan and purchased computer stickers to incentive completion. However, once every student had a device, classroom teachers were left asking a deceptively simple question: now what? Our big idea was that technology would transform learning. But in the face of nearly limitless tools and platforms, many classrooms defaulted to compliance rather than intentionality. Technology became something to implement rather than something to leverage. Teachers experimented with AI tools, adopted blended learning models, or moved assessments and content online, not always because those choices were instructionally sound, but because they were available or expected. In many cases, instruction remained at the substitution level: digital worksheets replaced paper ones, and online tasks mirrored traditional practices without fundamentally improving them.

What happened at Chicago Vocational during our first year of 1:1 is something that can be seen across schools nationwide. A quiet backlash against technology in the classroom has grown louder in recent months, disabusing the assumption that more technology equals more learning. This tension reveals an important truth: technology, by itself, does not improve learning. It can amplify strong teaching, but it cannot fix weak instruction, disengaged students, or substandard curriculum. It does not inherently create engagement, nor does it guarantee understanding. However, since technology has become firmly

entrenched in most 21st-century classrooms, effective technology integration (including AI usage) transcends mere access and adoption to become a fundamental shift in thinking.

The What

When students use technology without understanding why, they are following directions. When they can explain how a specific tool helps them solve a specific problem, they are doing something fundamentally different. Most people don't walk into a garage, pick up a hammer, and ask, "What can I hit?" Instead, most people start with a project. They think about what they are trying to build, fix, or create, and then they choose the right tool for the job.

Technology in the classroom should work the same way. Yet, in many 1:1 environments, the process gets reversed. The device is already in students' hands and the question quickly becomes, "How can I use this?" Instead of starting with the learning goal, we start with the tool, and instruction and activities are chosen to fit the technology rather than the intended learning.

Effective technology integration is not about using every tool available. It is about choosing the right tool and only when, and if, it is needed. Just as a builder would never use a hammer for every task, teachers should not feel pressure to use technology in every lesson.

Teachers can begin to integrate technology more thoughtfully into their instruction through a simple but important shift in thinking: Center with the learning, not the tool.

The How

The following protocol is designed to support both thoughtful technology integration and the intentional incorporation of co-design principles. Rather than encouraging the use of technology for its own sake, it prompts careful analysis of learning goals, student experience, and available tools. This process can be used in professional learning communities, collaborative planning teams, coaching sessions, or in partnership with students as co-designers of learning experiences.

Instructional coaching plays an important role in this work. When teachers are invited to rethink learning experiences in partnership with a coach, the focus shifts from implementation to reflection and intentional design. Coaching conversations create space to examine existing practices, question assumptions about student roles, and consider how both technology and co-design can deepen engagement. This collaborative reflection often leads to more flexible, responsive, and student-centered approaches to instruction.

Co-design between teachers and students further strengthens this work by positioning students as active participants in shaping their learning experiences. It communicates that their ideas, identities, and

communities are valued within the academic space, reinforcing the idea that learning is meaningful and connected to their lives.

Engaging in this reflective process strengthens instructional alignment while also building familiarity with a range of technological tools and their capabilities. Over time, this leads to a deeper understanding of technology, enabling both teachers and students to extend the use of digital tools in creative ways to construct meaning (TIM Rubric).

Centering Learning with Technology Co-Design Protocol

1. What is the learning goal/objective?
2. What skills/knowledge do students need to demonstrate by the end of the lesson/unit?
3. What activities will they engage in during this lesson?
4. For each activity, what kinds of technological tools are available, and what features do they have? How are these features aligned with the learning goals?
5. What kinds of choices are available to students in picking tools for this activity? Why are these choices being made?
6. How will technology change the way students engage in these skills/knowledge?

This protocol can be used to encourage the co-design process between instructional coaches and teachers or between teachers and their students.

Example Completed Protocol
ELA Class

Protocol Item	Considerations for Co-Design	Co-Design Outcomes
What is the learning goal/objective?	<i>This can be copied directly from lesson plans/curriculum maps.</i>	I can understand character motivation.
What skills/knowledge do students need to demonstrate by the end of the lesson/unit?	<i>This can be copied directly from lesson plans/curriculum maps.</i>	Students should be able to achieve the following:: ● Identify a character’s motivations (internal and external) ● Use text evidence to support their ideas ● Explain how motivations influence decisions, actions, and relationships ● Recognize how motivations may change over time ● Make inferences (reading between the lines, not just stating obvious traits)
What activities will they engage in during this lesson?	<i>This can be copied directly from lesson plans/curriculum maps. Teachers may need to identify more detailed activities and/or appropriate grain size of activities to engage in for co-design.</i>	Students will carry out the following: 1. Annotate a text focusing on character actions and dialogue. 2. Participate in discussion or debate about why a character acted a certain way. 3. Create a visual or creative representation (e.g., timeline, journal entry from the character’s perspective).
For each activity, what kinds of technological tools are available, and what features do they have? How are these features aligned with the learning goals?	<i>Coaches/teacher teams/admin can create a list of available tech tools (example) aligned to skills and knowledge prior to engaging in this activity. This list can be maintained and added to throughout the year as new tools become available.</i>	1. Annotate a text a. Print out text and use highlighters to identify passages. b. Google Docs—highlight with different colors/traits of different characters. c. Hypothes.is—annotate webpages, videos, images, etc. 2. Participate in a discussion a. Collect digital annotations to look across annotated texts for common themes and disagreements.

Protocol Item	Considerations for Co-Design	Co-Design Outcomes
		b. Utilize no technology tools. 3. Visual representation a. Draw timelines on paper with markers. b. Adobe express—create digital visual timeline.
What choices were made for the lesson? Why are these choices being made?	<i>Students can decide on which tool listed above best suits them, based on their previous familiarity with tools and their needs for this lesson. Teachers can provide insights into appropriate tool use for this purpose.</i>	For teachers: 1. Have students use Google Docs in small groups to annotate their text so that it can be analyzed for thematic similarities more easily. 2. Collect all Google Docs and project them for the whole class to see in order to visually identify similarly highlighted passages. Prompt discussions about themes and differences across groups. 3. Students will draw timelines on paper with markers so that they can be displayed on the wall for the rest of the unit. For students: 1. They are comfortable using Google Docs and will use the platform to annotate. 2. Students will have opportunities to discuss their ideas in small groups before sharing their thinking with the larger class. 3. Students are interested in learning more about Adobe Express and will use the platform to create visual timelines to share with their peers.
How will technology change the way students engage in these skills and apply their knowledge?	<i>Prompt teachers and/or students to think about the ways in which students are demonstrating their skills/knowledge in new or different ways through engagement in this lesson with these particular tool choices.</i>	Students will have new ways of seeing their peers' work and new ways of being able to identify common themes across their analyses of the text. Students will gain experience using Adobe Express tools and learn how to represent their ideas digitally and visually to share with others.

Additional Considerations

Guiding Questions for Educators

- Are students actively making sense of a complex problem, or are they using a device to find a pre-packaged answer?
- Does the application prompt students to work together productively, divide tasks, and support a culture of innovation, or are students working in individual silos?
- Are students using the tool to express, refine, and provide evidence for their own unique thinking?
- Does the technology grant student autonomy to tackle the problem from multiple viewpoints or design variations?
- How are students interacting with technology? Are they consumers, collaborators, or creators?

Guiding Questions for Administrators

- What do you want learning to look like at your school? What role does technology play? (Think about the back-to-back classroom experiences of students)
- Have you provided teachers with time to collaborate in PLCs (Professional Learning Communities)?

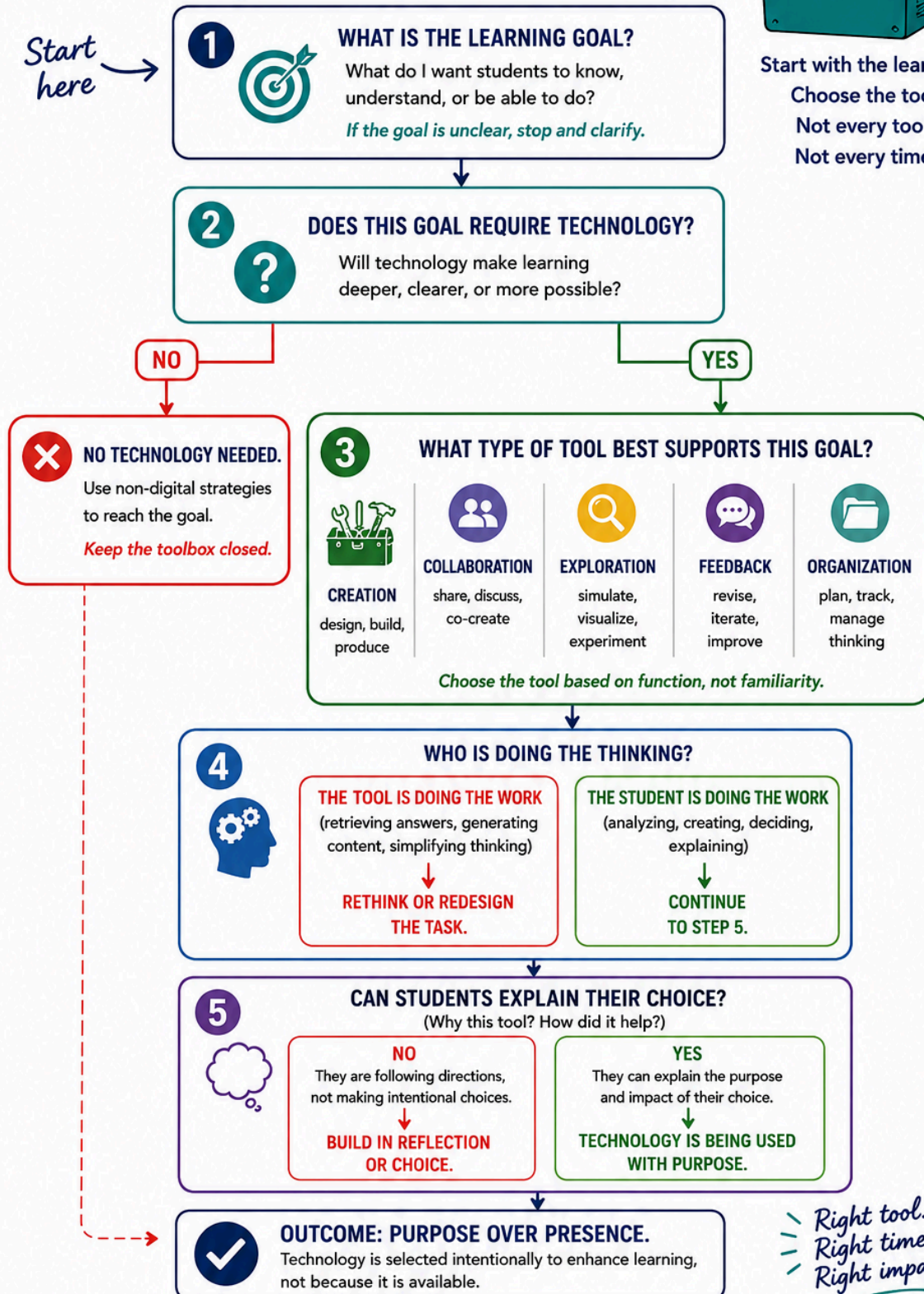
TECHNOLOGY DECISION TREE

Use the Right Tool for the Learning



Start with the learning.
Choose the tool.
Not every tool.
Not every time.

Start here →



REMEMBER: You don't use every tool in the toolbox for every project. Start with the learning. Choose what helps. Leave the rest.

*Better decisions.
Better learning.*



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