Living in a
SCREEN-
SATURATED
WORLD

An interview with Adriel Rivera

by Margie Carter

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www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue

Photograph courtesy of NZ study tour group

As an analog adult not born in the digital age, I struggle to clarify what technology I want to keep up with in my life. I love my cell phone, GPS, and the handful of apps I rely on, along with my laptop and projector. Email and texting are great for me, but I don't spend much time with social media. During a recent extended stay with my 91-year-old mother-in-law in an assisted living facility, I was able to bring her delight by googling song lyrics and movie stars she couldn't quite remember, as well as finding YouTube videos of things that have disappeared from her life, like square dancing and work in an auto plant. But when the great-grandkids

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Adriel Rivera is a technology-driven artist, musician, gamer, and learner who enjoys sharing his knowledge with teachers and students alike. For the last four years he has worked in an early childhood center, moving between its preschool and out-of-school programs. Adriel attended one of the study tours to New Zealand that Margie leads and was particularly inspired by the level of respect and trust that was given to each child and the involvement and evolution that is possible when teachers care for their children and feel supported.

paid a visit and stayed glued to their devices, I was reminded of the tension I feel in this digital world. Are we losing more than we are gaining? Is the addiction to devices significantly less problematic than cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs? I know these substances can kill you, but what part of our humanity are we killing when we turn to devices more than human beings?

I can tell how old-fashioned I am as I raise these questions and I certainly want to function well in the digital age. When my mother-in-law moved off the farm where she had raised her children she announced she was ready to be a 'modern woman' and wanted all the latest appliances after decades of making do with worn-out things. I found this endearing, especially compared to my grandmother nearly five decades earlier who responded to the news that I was traveling to Asia with the comment, "Why would anyone want to go that far from Indiana?" Do I sound that provincial when I raise concerns about how the digital age is impacting our humanity?

When Chip Donohue's (2015) article "Technology in the Early Years: 4M Roles for Digital Age Educators" appeared in *Exchange*, I found some very helpful guidelines for how to think about making appropriate and intentional choices in a screen-saturated world. It was a timely article for me, too, because I had just visited an after-school program where teacher Adriel Rivera showed me his initial efforts to start introducing computers into his program. I was impressed with how he was approaching this, especially as someone who was born into and is very comfortable with the digital world.

A Dialog with Adriel Rivera

Margie: Adriel, the room you inherited for your after-school program has presented so many challenges, not the least of which is having to share it with other activity groups in the school. I was so impressed by how, with very few resources and a challenging space, you created some soft, home-like elements, ways to display the children's work and

some learning stories. You described how you were becoming a 'scrounge artist,' pressing into service or repurposing a number of castoffs, including computers. You knew then that screen time was a controversial topic. I'd like you to recap your initial thinking and process for bringing computers into the classroom.

Adriel: Computers have been my friend since I was a young military brat living overseas. They helped me grow in so many different ways as a kid, so to me having computers in the classroom is just as natural as having paint or puzzles or books. Computers allowed me to explore different skills like painting, reading, creating music, and surviving a cave full of snakes when I didn't have money for real paints, or someone to teach me piano, or … a cave. As an after-school teacher, I wanted my group to have access to all the cool opportunities that I had. Even though, for example, we have paints and a piano in the classroom, for some children these things might not be the right tools to open the door to a real passion.

As it turned out, a parent, who worked in I.T. (information technology) overheard me speaking about bringing computers into the class and decided to help us out. She contacted a place that agreed to donate four used PCs from a city-owned warehouse. I was so eager to have them in the class that I went to pick them up myself. The PCs sat in storage for about two months because we didn't have any tables to put them on and had only two electrical outlets. I really wanted a nicer area, something like an Internet café, but due to lack of resources, we ended up with two long tables that we scrounged from the school.

Margie: I remember you telling me that you also didn't want to have the children arrive with computers

suddenly set up in the room. Recognizing that children are typically introduced to a computer that is all set up was a good insight to inform how you wanted to do it differently.

Adriel: When it came time to hook everything up, I had the idea to give that opportunity to the children so I asked for volunteers who would be interested in helping. Only a few volunteered, but these were the kids who had a personal interest in the computer area. I thought it was important to have them involved from the very beginning in hopes that they might develop a sense of ownership, not just over the computers, but also of the area. So I told them, "You might need to move some furniture," and then I let them go at it. I didn't give them instructions on how to set up the computers, but I let them think about it, struggle with it, use each other as resources, and then if they were truly stuck, I supported them through the set-up process by asking them questions which would help them come up with the answer.

Supporting Children to be Creators, not Consumers

Margie: In that initial visit to your classroom we talked about ways to ensure that screen time would have a social component to it as well: what Chip

Donohue calls 'helping the children progress from media consumers to creators.' Which of these have you tried and how has that process unfolded?

Adriel: I brought in some music-making programs in the hopes of connecting one of the computers to an electric keyboard borrowed from the music teacher and this generated a small amount of interest. Then I brought in a painting program and an old digital drawing tablet that I had, but getting the old computers to work with the newer program took too long and interest was quickly lost. Later I stopped by a Goodwill store and found a few programs that might work with our PCs and could be, in my opinion, more 'educational' than the web-based games that were available (puzzle games, board games, and racing simulation games). The problem was that these games were old, and some were not compatible with our machines. I knew there was interest in playing games, but finding ones that were challenging, educational, fun, and functional on our computers was starting to feel overwhelming. I finally remembered a piece of software that I'd used before that was not really a game, but it allowed you to create your own game. I wasn't sure if the group would find it enjoyable, but I tried it anyway and they loved it!

Photograph courtesy Adriel Rivera

I discovered that they weren't just making a game, they were coming up with plots, characters, worlds, and conflicts. They were encountering situations where they not only had to problem solve how to deliver their story within the game, but they also had to problem solve how to manipulate the software to do what they wanted. They were beyond just creating; this was digital artistic self-expression.

Margie: When you read Chip Donohue's article, did you find his formulation of "the 3Cs," "the 5Es," and "the 4 Ms" were things you were inventing your way into?

Adriel: Absolutely! The article filled me with reassurance that I was at least headed in the right direction. The 3Cs made so much sense to me. Content is what I wanted to find in the software I was bringing into the classroom; and I think content, not 'educational software,' is what most parents are actually looking to find: quality content. And consideration for the individual child was very important to me. It's the reason that I made an invitation to those who were interested to make a game instead of making it a mandatory project for the entire class.

Negotiating with Parents

Margie: Initially you had some pushback from a parent or two. How has that ongoing negotiation gone for you?

Adriel: I was surprised at the reactions I was getting when I announced to the parents that we would be getting computers. I expected some excitement, after all we are surrounded by technology; but instead, the reactions were bland and unenthusiastic. I think that comes from a limited view of computers as a tool for self-expression, art, and deep learning. For example, one parent asked if there was a way that we could limit her child's screen time to 15 minutes because screen time was used as a reward system at home and the parent didn't want it to

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lose its effectiveness. I replied by letting the parent know that we will always do our best to accommodate special requests, just like we would for any other matter — allergies, special dietary needs, homework time, and the like. I later invited that child to participate in making

his own game and to my surprise, he had no interest in making a game. "I just want to play them," he replied. Not being one to ignore his interest or his parents' concerns, I started thinking of ways that I might deepen his knowledge and appreciation for the process of making a game and to include him in this wonderful community of game makers that was growing in the classroom. Then it finally came to me; his interest was in playing games, so I invited him to be our official 'game tester.' He loved the idea. Soon the kids making the games were scheduling him to come play their game, take note of errors, glitches, storylines, and epic battles. It was great, 15 minutes at a time.

Margie: Are there things you've tried that have excited or disappointed you in this process?

Adriel: I was very excited to have the opportunity to use computers as another way to learn more about my group of kids. Every time I saw them talking to each other about how they solved a problem, or some funny thing that happened to one of them in a game, it reminded me of how I think a classroom should sound. I was hearing learning happening and community being built. I was also excited about all the first-time experiences that some of them had. One child transferred a simple tune that she made on a keyboard to a music editing program, and with a little help created a 'battle theme' for one of the games. She

Photograph courtesy Adriel Rivera
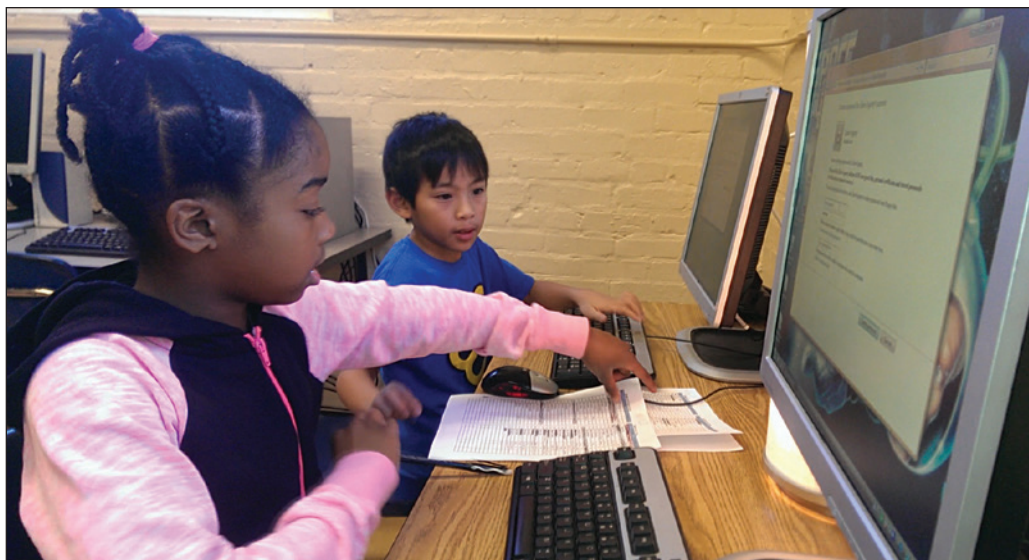
now tells people that she knows how to make music, and I would have to agree. She might not know any advanced skills in making music (yet), but I believe that in her mind, it's only a matter of time before she does. That's important. That is what our classrooms should seek to accomplish, with or without computers, although, I'm almost certain that video games are going to play a big part of education in the future.

As exciting and important as these stories were to me, it was a huge disappointment when we were told that screen time was supposed to be limited to one hour a week. I think I was more disappointed than the kids to hear of this rule. Being limited seemed like something that they had grown somewhat accustomed to. So now it's back to figuring out how to squeeze such a big goal into one hour a week.

Margie: Do you have any suggestions for educators who are trying to integrate technology into their time with kids?

Adriel: I would recommend that educators do their best to find ways of participating alongside the children in any aspect of the classroom. A computer in a classroom can be just as valuable as a great book, an art set, or a pencil and paper; but don't ignore the fact that even a book or an art area can be just as mind-numbing and uninspirational if there is nothing there to ignite curiosity. Last, I would recommend reading up on the use of technology during the early years from Mr. Donohue. I think it might help those who need a starting point on bringing any technology into the classroom.

References

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How to Select the Best Technology for YOUR Classroom

Kelly Elmore, Kaplan Early Learning Company

Exposure to technology has become a given in the homes of many young children. Inevitably, this exposure has led to the expectation that young children will also use technology in the classroom setting. With so many choices available today, just how should one go about making technology selections for the classroom?

Deciding which technology to integrate into any classroom is seemingly one of the most daunting tasks that an educator faces today. From conflicting guidelines about screen time use to unfamiliar terminology and confusing marketing, the technology landscape appears tricky to traverse. A little research and thoughtful decisions can make selecting technology for the classroom a manageable and rewarding task.

Follow the guidelines below to make informed and educationally sound decisions for your classroom:

■ Take a step back and trust what you already know about the learning styles of children and best practices in the classroom; draw from this knowledge in the same way you would when selecting blocks, manipulatives, or reading materials. Technology can be intimidating, but remember that it is just another means to deliver instruction and learning opportunities. There will be time to learn how to use the technology once a decision in made; the important thing to remember at this step is to keep the educational value front and center in your classroom.

Decide what purpose you want the technology to serve in your classroom. Technology that is purchased for technology's sake is a poor investment. Some points to consider here:

- Do you want to use the technology for small group instruction?
- Do you want children to be able to use the technology independently or do you want them to work together?
- Can the technology promote verbal interaction with children and caregivers?
- Does this technology support your current curriculum?
- Do you want the technology to be stationary or do you want it to move easily around the classroom?
- Do you want the technology to promote natural learning opportunities or to be used primarily for assessment?
- Do you want the technology to be used to improve the home-school connection?
- Search for solutions that will fill your identified needs for your classroom. When you find some possible solutions, ask yourself these clarifying questions:
  - How does this technology support the purpose that I identified at the start?
  - Does this technology address the learning styles of my children?
  - Are there ongoing costs associated with this device or program? Do I have the budget to support it?
  - Does this solution include training or support?

By using this process, and always circling back to your own knowledge about how children learn as the foundation for each of your decisions, the selection process should be a manageable and rewarding one for you and should benefit your students in the long run.