Maintaining student attention and focus in the large World Politics introduction class has always been challenging. With the exponential growth of technological options, the task becomes even more daunting and the pitfalls of technology for its own sake lurk everywhere. What was once the forum for the classic Professor personality now demands a combination of three very different personae to address the diverse learning styles of contemporary students. These three ideal-type personae are: Mr. Wizard who guides the class through a PowerPoint galaxy populated by a myriad of fonts and colors. Mr. Wizard prefers graphics over text and believes that no icon should go unclicked for more than fifteen seconds; the Entertainer who presents a dynamic David Letterman/Jay Leno wit and glibness. He senses dull moments and fills these spaces with drama, stories, strategic irreverence, and a wide array of cultural knowledge that engages the audience; and of course, the Professor who commands the attention and respect of students with his/her wisdom, logic, and clarity.

Mr. Wizard’s administrative capacities are enormous and free up valuable time that would be taken up by mundane tasks, especially handouts. The class website contains the syllabus, study guides for examinations, essay assignments, recent media downloads, and a list of relevant links. But technology can come with a heavy price. The key to using Mr. Wizard successfully is to know where he is necessary and where he gets in the way of active learning. Some keen observers of computers in education, Clifford Stoll and Jeremy Rifkin, are dubious about the intrusion of technology into the classroom. They suggest that the proliferation of visual stimuli that Mr. Wizard scatters throughout class presentations induces students to constantly shift focus and thereby shorten their attention spans. Mr. Wizard’s contributions to the large introductory class are most valuable when they serve ancillary functions and the frequency of screen presentations is reduced.

The Entertainer loves the lapel microphone and spends the first moments of the class musing about whatever strikes his fancy, usually observations about current events. He is unpredictable and irreverent and stands behind the Professor like a hired gunslinger, continually scanning the students for signs of wavering attention spans and dead moments. One of the problems with the Entertainer persona is that students may enjoy the show but are they actively learning? The Entertainer must practice self-restraint if he is to maintain a level of pedagogical integrity. Although not everyone is prepared to be an Entertainer, there are some helpful hints. Students are directly wired to the popular culture and tapping this ever changing milieu can be an effective technique for maintaining student focus on World Politics. For example, watching more television than may be palatable can be useful in discussing the Survivor program in the context of Liberalism versus Realism.

Inevitably, it is the Professor who does the real teaching. There are no shortcuts when the Wizard is inappropriate or the Entertainer fails to strike pedagogical gold. The Professor is the heart of the enterprise and must actually know something that is worthwhile to profess. He/she walks the aisles searching for sentient life and tries to reach students through the force of ideas. The trump card in the Professor’s deck is still the most flexible teaching technology and pedagogically transparent tool available, blackboard and chalk; the Professor doesn’t think about technical hurdles while putting chalk to board. Venn diagrams go up in seconds and are quickly labeled. “I can do that in PowerPoint and Photoshop,” whines Mr. Wizard. “I am sure you can, but try inserting an arrow or adding a label in one second,” the Professor retorts. The Professor also assigns essays and research papers because students deserve to have their thinking examined. The Professor muses that perhaps Mr. Wizard will develop a scanning program that can grade both writing and content. We will hold our breath. Despite his/her shortcomings, it is the Professor who must daily slog through the university trenches, advise students, and teach a little something every day a little bit at a time.

The anecdotal and personal nature of teaching cannot be reduced to broad generalizations and simple pedagogical recommendations. Even with colleagues and teaching assistants in close proximity, teaching is usually a solitary experience. And, a critical discussion of technological limits is certainly not an indication that one is mired in Gutenberg’s universe. But we must seriously consider the negative effects on active learning and attention span when the insertion of computer technology in education becomes a panacea.