

Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:05] This is Leading Lines, I'm Derek Bruff. I mentioned on Twitter that this episode of Leading Lines was a little delayed because the podcast team was enjoying some downtime over winter break. That's only mostly true. One of our producers, Melissa Mallon, took advantage of the holiday time to get some work done. You see, Melissa had been wanting to interview her sister Megan for a little while and since they were both home over break visiting their parents, Melissa brought along a microphone to talk with Megan in-person. Melissa and Megan have perhaps a little more in common than your typical sisters. Both are educators. Melissa as a librarian here at Vanderbilt University and Megan as a fifth-grade teacher at Bluemont Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas. Both are technologists weaving digital and information literacy instruction in the work they do with students. Both help other teachers develop their teaching skills. Melissa working with librarians here in her capacity of Director of Teaching and Learning at the Vanderbilt Libraries. And Megan working with pre-service teachers in the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at Kansas State University.

[1:12] And as it happens, they're also identical twins. Megan and Melissa have lead conference sessions and professional development workshops together as the Mallon Tech Twins. And I'm excited to share their conversation here on Leading Lines. Although I will warn you, their voices sound an awful lot alike. Megan shares some stories from her experience teaching fifth graders, including the ways she introduces them to technology. And she offered some advice for college and university educators on teaching the students they'll see in their classrooms in the coming years. (music)

Melissa Mallon: [1:49] I'm very pleased to introduce Megan Mallon, who is a fifth-grade teacher at Bluemont Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas. And she is also a teaching assistant in the Masters of Arts in Teaching program for the College of Education at Kansas

State University. And she is also my twin sister. Hi, Megan.

Megan Mallon: [2:09] Hey, thanks for having me.

Melissa: [2:11] So Megan and I have done a lot of work together on educational technologies and digital literacies from the sort of K12 through higher ed spectrum. And so I wanted to talk with her a little bit today about some of her philosophies and thoughts related to digital literacy. Especially from kind of the K12 into college perspective. So Meg, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about, your sort of, generally your philosophy regarding teaching with educational technologies, particularly in the K 12 level.

Megan: [2:50] Yeah, absolutely. I've now taught long enough that I've seen a lot, a shift, from early technologies, which was a computer in a classroom, to now we have one-to-one iPads, in my classroom, which is amazing. And I think the thing that I keep coming back to year after year, time after time is that you should never be using technology tools just for the sake of using them because they're cool or they're new, not that iPads are necessarily new anymore. The kids are pretty used to them. But I see a lot of times people will just kind of say, "oh, if I put a tech spin on this, it'll make it a cool lesson." And I think that I really believe strongly, it just needs to be natural and beneficial to what you're already doing. You can't forget about what you're supposed to be teaching and the good ways that teachers teach anyway. So that's probably the thing that I always come back to and just really trying to make sure that whatever I'm doing is meaningful for the students and is an authentic experience for them.

Melissa: [4:01] So how do you go about determining whether or not something's authentic and meaningful?

Megan: [4:06] Well, I really try to see if it provides them some relevance or some practice for something that they'll use outside of the classroom, even things like learning how to give a presentation using technology. Those are things that they'll transfer to jobs and to experiences when they are finished with school. And it's, I think that's a really great opportunity to give them or something like letting them plan a road trip with maps and doing research on the internet. Those are just things that they will use in their real life. So I think that's a great way to still teach the standards, but also make it meaningful.

Melissa: [4:49] And you're speaking to the Common Core standards, right?

Megan: [4:52] Common Core Standards. I also try to always keep in mind the ISTE NET

standards. That's a set of technology standards that K12 use. And so mostly yes, Common Core, but also some of those other standards as well.

Melissa: [5:10] I love this idea that you're giving them sort of activities that mimic real life scenarios that need to be doing research. Do you talk about that? Do you kind of, do you have them discuss how they might use these skills in real-life?

Megan: [5:27] Well, I teach fifth grade and for those of you listening that aren't used to being around fifth graders, "what's the point of this?" is a question that's asked almost every day. So yes, I do. I do tell them what the point of this is and I mean, kids are pretty smart and they can usually pick up, and if something's just thrown in there, just for the sake of flashiness, they can see through that. They're smart. Even, I've taught as young as kindergarten, and they may be, aren't as savvy when it comes to that sort of thing. But a question that I just always answer is, "So what? What's the point? Why are we doing this?" And I, I mean, that really applies to technology and other things as well.

Melissa: [6:11] And I think it's something that the teacher should also think, right?

Megan: [6:15] Yes, absolutely, yes, for sure.

Melissa: [6:18] So I know that you, and this is a topic area that's very popular all the way from, from kindergarten through higher ed. But I know you've taught a lot and done a lot of work with digital citizenship and teaching your students how to be sort of those critical consumers of information. Can you talk a little bit about how you approach that? Maybe the critical thinking and go a little bit, especially with younger students.

Megan: [6:45] Yeah, absolutely. The district I teach in, in Manhattan, Kansas. We're lucky enough that our director of technology is Dr. Mike Ribble. And he is sort of a leading person in the field of digital citizenship. He wrote a book called *Digital Citizenship in Schools*. In that book, he talks about nine essential elements of digital citizenship. And those are something that I try to come back to time and time again. Sometimes I'll do some specific teaching of those skills. There's, I don't know if people are familiar, I'm sure because it's a pretty popular website, commonsensemedia.org is a great website. They have a lot of specific lessons just to teach those skills. So sometimes, especially when it comes to maybe safety online and thinking through that sort of thing, I might specifically teach, but otherwise, I just try to integrate it into what we're doing anyway.

[7:48] For example, we do a lot of research. So we'll spend time talking about how do you know if a website is legitimate and has good information? Then you're also bringing in those media literacy skills. Melissa, you and I have worked quite a bit on that in teaching and doing workshops on that. And so those are kind of some times that they can apply those skills then that they're learning. And with the younger students, we do have to talk about etiquette too online. That's one of those nine elements. As I said, security, keeping yourself safe. Kids, nowadays, I think don't always understand like how scary the internet can be. And so I think it's our job to kind of help them navigate through that. There are so many online, Tik Tok and Instagram and things that can be scary for kids. They may not think so, but I know their parents probably do and we as adults do, so kind of helping them. But anyway, so we'll use those skills, but kind of apply them to projects and things that we're doing anyways.

Melissa: [9:01] Can I touch back to what you were just talking about with safety and privacy because that's something that I've been thinking a lot about at the higher ed level, you know, and just the idea that that there is a lot of like privacy and safety concerns that none of us are really thinking that much about or maybe we are, but we're not, we don't know if we should really be concerned. So it's really interesting to me to hear that you're talking about that with fifth graders. Do they, are they responsive to it?

Megan: [9:32] They really are. And, you know, I think even kids as young as early elementary, are diving into this world. And, you know, a lot of things have age limits. Kids don't always pay attention to that, or age minimums, I should say.

Melissa: [9:48] Oh, that's a good point.

Megan: [9:50] We have some excellent conversations. We even have conversations about our cell phones listening to us or just the things I think that adults sometimes feel kind of scared to think about or talk about.

Melissa: [10:05] Yeah, we just like put our heads in the sand.

Megan: [10:07] Let's just pretend this isn't happening or put the tape over your webcam.

Melissa: [10:11] Yeah, we're not being surveilled all the time.

Megan: [10:13] Yeah, there's no Big Brother. But I think that what I love about my elementary students and what I love about middle school and high school students is that they are, they

are so eager to learn and they want to know and they want to make these smart choices. And the hope is then that they can maybe teach their parents or they can carry that through and learn that if they learn it now. It's even something like we use, we do blogging in my class and we use a platform called Kidblog. And for their usernames, instead of having their first name, last name, we just did first name and then the first initial of their last name. So you know just little things like that that maybe don't seem super huge and like revolutionary, but I'm hoping that they can take those little things and carry them through.

Melissa: [11:04] That's great. I like that. So kind of flipping to other sides. We're talking about them sort of consuming and being part of this sort of media culture. What about getting students to create or produce information? You mentioned that you use blogging a lot, is this a lot of their first experiences with blogs?

Megan: [11:29] Yeah, yeah. It definitely can be, you know, I've done it with when I taught kindergarten, like I said, and third grade.

Melissa: [11:35] You had your kindergarteners blog?

Megan: [11:36] Oh yeah.

Melissa: [11:37] I don't think I knew that.

Megan: [11:39] Sometimes it would be like, "I like dogs." But it was blogging.

Melissa: [11:44] I mean that's really good information to put out there.

Megan: [11:46] Exactly. And also, I think the biggest thing that something, a platform like that gives them, is a global audience. And even now, in the year 2019, a lot of times kids' products are just for their teacher or for, you know, maybe they share it with their classmates and nothing inspires a kid more sometimes than knowing that someone, I mean, we had someone in New Zealand looking at our blogs. There's a little map on there that will show who's all looked at, locations, and had looked at our blog. And that just perk them up. And a cool thing about Kidblog, is they can connect with other classrooms, so we connected with this class in England. And they can comment on each other's. And so that just gives them more pride. They can learn from others. So I think that's something that I really like about that.

Melissa: [12:41] Yeah, that is great. I love that idea of kind of making global citizens.

Megan: [12:45] Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And you know, that's kind of ties in to the digital citizenship, as well. And kind of that maybe the etiquette there. And some of those other things.

Melissa: [12:56] Are there any other sort of ways of producing information that you have explored with them? Anything that you thought like, "I'm not sure if this is going to work, but I'm just gonna do it anyway."

Megan: [13:09] This is not a new app necessarily, but we recently got a subscription, I guess. I'm not sure if that's the right word for it, to some of the Adobe Spark apps. And so we've been playing around with that a little bit. Something too, I think a lot of times teachers are kind of scared to try new things because what if they don't know all about it? And I'm just honest with my kids and I'll say, "I've never used this before, figure it out," and then they'll teach me things. And you know, sure you want to look through the apps a little bit, make sure it's safe, make sure it's user-friendly. But so that's something we've been kind of playing around with.

Melissa: [13:43] What kind of things are you having them do?

Megan: [13:46] One thing that we started the year out, really not necessarily any curriculum related, but they just made an autobiographical narrative. And so the cool thing about the Spark app is that they can record their voice, put pictures in, put some text in. So they kind of piece together pictures from their family and their lives. And it really helped us as a class know each other in ways. I mean, they share things about family members that had died and different experiences that they'd had, that I don't think that they would've just said. That's another thing I love just about really any technology is it can give students who are shy, who are maybe slower processors, a chance to share their thoughts when they may not be able to in class. And I think that applies all the way through the university level as well.

Melissa: [14:40] Yeah, I agree. I think technology can definitely be an equalizer. But it gives the platform for people. I mean, going back to the early days of blogging and Live Journal or whatever. You know when that one was? It gives people, sometimes it can be a negative thing, but also, like you said, especially because they're using it almost like to gain empathy. I think that's really cool.

Megan: [15:06] Something I haven't done a lot with yet, but I'm kind of exploring a little bit is YouTube. And that, I mean, this age of students are obsessed with YouTube. Every day I have

to go home from work and Google something that they talked, a meme or a YouTube star that they told me about that. I'm like, "I think you're speaking a foreign language." And so I think that would, that's just really a platform that they're into. And I think that's part of our culture right now and so I'm kind of exploring some ways to use that in class as well.

Melissa: [15:40] Very cool. Okay, so I'm going to sort of launch forward, I guess, in terms of age, right? And so you also work with college students and you do a lot of mentoring and being a cooperating teacher for pre-service teachers, education students. Do you see any crossovers or kind of similarities between your fifth graders and the college students you work with? Are you, do you see ways that digital literacy or media literacy is almost ageless, if that makes sense?

Megan: [16:20] That's a great question and totally true. Yeah, I do. I feel like honestly, those college students need those skills taught just as much as the younger kids, maybe, we'll come to a point where they've had these consistently taught to them from an early age. I think we're not there yet. And so I think the kids or the students in college still sort of need those reminders about how to be safe online, like we talked about earlier, what's the proper way to communicate, how to find information and, and navigate through what's good news and what's bad news. We don't love the term fake news.

Melissa: [17:08] We do not love fake news.

Megan: [17:10] But you know how to find those, those things. So I think that they still do need to be taught that. I also think that this is something that you might not think about. But how they interact, like my pre-service students, how they interact online with the younger students or how they model those because they might be on Tik Tok too. And if they don't have a private account, then I've got my fifth graders interacting in that way with their soon teachers or whatever. And I don't, to us as an older generation that just we recognize all the problems that could happen.

Melissa: [17:53] There should be some boundaries.

Megan: [17:56] And I just, I'm not sure that the college students necessarily think about that. They're not doing anything wrong. They're not trying to, you know, but they just don't think through that. So I think that's something that we have to kind of teach them, as well.

Melissa: [18:07] Yeah, I think that's really interesting because I was, when I was asking the

question, I was thinking about, you know, kind of skill sets that they might need, you know, that maybe there's some crossover there, but I hadn't really thought about the fact that they're interacting in the same environments, digital environments as the students that they're working with. So that's yeah, that's fascinating. So do you just kind of wait until that sort of thing comes up or do you talk about it with them?

Megan: [18:38] Sometimes I'll kind of share like a precautionary tale about making sure you have personal and professional accounts, or keeping accounts private, you know?

And everyday, not everyday, but often I have, "will you be my Instagram friend? Can we be Snapchat friends?" and I just always say "family only," or "no student rule," or whatever. You just kind of have to have that figured out. And so yeah, I'll usually kind of breach that topic before it becomes an issue. And I think they're pretty thankful to like, have someone point that out because they're not always, you know, thinking about it.

Melissa: [19:18] Yeah. I mean, I feel like that's sort of a timeless issue too, because even in, you know, professors in university settings, they've got to figure out those boundaries. And it used to be just like, who would you go for a beer with after class? And now it's like, who's friends on Instagram?

Megan: [19:37] Exactly. Yeah, and sometimes that line is a little more blurry I think when you're working with adult students, as well. And then kind of going back to more of the teaching aspect of it, I have seen so many lesson plans, and you know, pre-service teachers are just learning how to write lesson plans. But so many times there'll be a spot on it that says, "how are you going to integrate technology?" And it will be like, "I showed a video using the projector." (both laugh) Or "I took pictures."

Melissa: [20:11] Hopefully not like transparencies.

Megan: [20:13] No, thank goodness.

Melissa: [20:14] We're done with those?

Megan: [20:16] Overhead transparencies have officially died, I hope. (laughs) But anyway, so I think that's something that is really important. You know, sometimes they may take a technology class in college in their education program. And I just really strongly, and I'm so pleased with what I've seen at Kansas State University because they really in those math methods, literacy methods, they integrate technology throughout that. And I think that's

something that we just need to keep pushing and keep teaching them because that can be really hard for them. They think about how they use technology and it's rare for them to get the kids using it.

Melissa: [21:00] Well, and that goes back to what you were saying earlier about how it shouldn't be a separate thing, that it should be integrated into what you're already doing to the lessons, it should make sense. And so that's a good way of modeling for these college students that are going to be teachers, that look, it's just part of what we do.

Megan: [21:22] And sometimes they have to think about it a little bit more directly at the beginning. And my hope then is that it just will come naturally to them.

Melissa: [21:31] Be more seamless.

Megan: [21:33] Yeah, exactly.

Melissa: [21:34] So one question that I had, is if there's anything that you would like, you just want to make sure that higher ed educators know about the students.

Megan: [21:45] Oh, I got a platform here, don't I?

Melissa: [21:46] Oh, yes you do, absolutely. This is your time.

Megan: [21:50] This is my time to shine.

Melissa: [21:52] So what do you want those in that are getting the students that you're teaching and sending up, hopefully going to college, what would you want?

Megan: [22:03] What message?

Melissa: [22:05] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Megan: [22:07] Impart upon them? I think it's just important to know that all of these kids that are in K12 now, especially, elementary and middle school, are so used to technology. And so I think it's just essential to figure out a way to integrate that and whether it's through note-taking or production, I think these kids are, really good at critical thinking and they need opportunities beyond just writing a paper. Sure, that's important and you've got to do that in college, and that's a huge skill to learn in college. But give them some opportunities to

create. I think they're just like that's just ingrained in them and they're good at it. And they can come up with such amazing things, sort of giving them that choice, that option of different ways to produce. So I would, I would love to tell them that. I think that there's just don't put a limit on anything. Don't put a limit on the kids' creativity, the students' creativity, don't put a limit on what maybe you're scared to do. Because just like in elementary school, if you say, "figure it out," they will.

Melissa: [23:22] I'm glad you said that because I was just making myself a note to ask you what advice you might give to teachers or faculty members or whomever that are nervous about using technology that they don't know how to use.

Megan: [23:36] And I will say, I've seen with my grownup students, versus my elementary students, those grown-up students are sometimes a little more resistant to trying something new, a new app. And I think that the more everyone kind of pushes that and integrates that, the more they'll say, "okay, well this is just a way, this is a part of college, learning these new things."

Melissa: [24:01] Experiment. Try it.

Megan: [24:03] Exactly.

Melissa: [24:04] Because that's a part of the learning process, right?

Megan: [24:05] Absolutely, yeah. And I think that that could be something like that, as a community, that can just sort of be brought just, again, like you said, seamlessly integrated in. And then probably the other main thing I would say, is just open up those classroom walls. Just like I talked about having that global audience, that's important for higher ed too. And you can do a lot with a discussion board and responding, but there's, make it more than that. One of the professors that teaches a literacy class at Kansas Sate, Dr. Lotta Larson, does one assignment where the students have to go read an article and then post comments on it. And it's, I think things like that are so authentic.

Melissa: [24:56] Like post comments on the website?

Megan: [24:58] On that website. Yes. Yeah. So like kind of just down at the bottom and she did that one week as opposed to discussion board posts. And so those are the things I think that are meaningful and real life and authentic, just like we're trying to provide to those

younger students, as well. So getting them out there, pushing them out, kind of giving them that global audience, I think is great.

Melissa: [25:20] Good advice, very good advice. So we're reaching the end of our time here. And I would like to ask you the question that we ask everyone on Leading Lines.

Megan: [25:28] Oh boy. Is it an easy one?

Melissa: [25:32] I think it's an easy one. You'll get it. So we always like to ask, you know, this is a podcast about educational technologies. And a lot of times and today we've been focusing on a lot of digital tools. But we always like to ask about your favorite analog educational technology.

Megan: [25:53] Okay, that is not necessarily an easy question. (laughs)

Melissa: [25:56] I apologize. (laughs)

Megan: [25:57] If you asked me digital, then I'm on it. You know, I think I might, and I don't know if this counts, but I think I might say, your brain.

Melissa: [26:08] That totally counts. I don't know that I've heard that response before.

Megan: [26:11] Oh, okay. Well, okay. So I would say your brain because just like a robot is worthless without the person, robots aren't smart. It's the person who's programming them. Technology is nothing, is worthless without the brains behind it. And especially like you said, pulling in that critical thinking piece, making connections, obviously, you need your brain for that. And so I think I think that's what I would go with.

Melissa: [26:42] I like it.

Megan: [25:44] Yeah, you can't have digital tech without your brain.

Melissa: [26:47] Your analog.

Megan: [26:48] Your analog brain.

Melissa: [26:49] Maybe someday we'll have digital brains.

Megan: [26:50] That's true. And so you'll have to re-ask me that question. I'll be thinking of

my next answer.

Melissa: [26:54] I feel like that's a whole other podcast.

Megan: [26:55] Yeah, I don't think we have time for that today.

Melissa: [26:58] Well, Megan, thank you so much.

Megan: [27:01] My pleasure.

Melissa: [27:03] You and I can talk about these sorts of things and we just shout out, we go on the conference circuit. So if you'd ever like some twins to come talk about.

Megan: [27:11] Mallon Tech Twins. (laughs)

Melissa: [27:15] We'll come talk about educational technologies.

Megan: [27:16] We would love to.

Melissa: [27:18] But I, I just, I appreciate so much hearing your perspective from the sort of younger students' side of things. And I always learn things for me, it helps me.

Megan: [27:30] And vice versa from the higher ed as well, so.

Melissa: [27:34] Yeah, and I think that's it. Maybe that's one of the reasons I really wanted to interview you for the podcasts is because I think it's so necessary to have the conversation.

Megan: [27:45] Yes, agreed.

Melissa: [27:46] Between whatever grade level because we're all teaching the same students, just at different points in their lives.

Megan: [27:50] That's an excellent point. I totally agree. Yeah.

Melissa: [27:53] So thank you so much.

Megan: [27:54] Yes, my pleasure.

Melissa: [27:58] Yeah. It's been great talking with you today.

Megan: [27:59] With you, as well. (music)

Derek: [28:02] That was Megan Mallon, fifth grade teacher at Bluemont Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas. And one half of the Mallon Tech Twins, with our Leading Lines producer, Melissa Mallon, I really appreciated what Melissa said there at the end of the interview. "We're all teaching the same students, just at different points in their lives." It's easy to think K12 and college are two very different worlds. But for many of our students, the one leads directly into the other. And I appreciated Megan's advice for college educators on integrating technology in their teaching, as a way to meet their students where they are. Thanks so much to Melissa and Megan, for taking some time during winter break to record this interview. If you'd like to hear more from Megan Mallon, I recommend following her on Twitter, where her handle is @mallon3. Melissa's Twitter handle is @librarianliss. And they occasionally tweet together at @mallontechtwins.

[28:58] You'll find links to all those Twitter accounts in the show notes, along with information on some of the tools and resources Megan mentioned in her interview. You'll find the show notes for this and every other episode of Leading Lines on our website, leadinglinespod.com. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the connections between K12 and higher education. You can reach us via email at leadinglinespod@vanderbilt.edu, or on Twitter @LeadingLinesPod. Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries and the Associate Provost for Education, Development, and Technologies. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening. (music)