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Plugging In: What Technology Brings to the English/Language Arts Classroom

"It should be our delight to watch this turmoil, do battle with the ideas and visions of our own time, to seize what we can use, to kill what we consider worthless, and above all to be generous to the people that are giving shape as best as they can to the ideas within them."

—Virginia Woolf, "Hours in a Library"

In thinking about the role that technology plays in the English/language arts classroom, I am reminded of an advertisement that I stumbled across when paging through a recent edition of *Education Weekly*. The ad featured an image of two students behind two laptop computers. The image centered on the corporate logo prominently displayed on the front of each computer, allowing only the top-most edge of the students' heads to be seen over either screen. The text listed across the rear of the advertisement exalted that this was "The Classroom of the Future."

I was as struck by what the image revealed as by what it didn't. I was chilled by the absence of student faces, by my inability to see what was on their screens, and by the very explicit message that this was a learning environment that we are rapidly moving toward. What I brought away from that instinctive reaction was a firm determination to keep *students* at the center of instruction, and to use technology as a tool, not a goal.

I'm the first to argue that in order to prepare our students for success outside of our classrooms, a twelfth grader needs to do much more than read at a twelfth-grade level. We live in an age that demands technological and visual literacies alongside strong skills in reading and writing. Students must be effective communicators. However, I don't see any of that reflected in this advertisement. Rather, I see a line of thinking that supports learning *from* a computer. If 15 years pondering the role of technology in classroom learning has taught us anything, it has to be that knowledge does not lie within technology; technology is only a tool that helps to unlock the power and the promise of learning.

As teachers, we are used to making choices. We choose the texts that we want our students to enjoy and to explore. We choose the challenges that we want them to experience as writers. With the continued introduction of increasingly powerful technologies into our classroom spaces, we must now learn how to choose the most efficient and effective tools for our student learners.

Different tools present unique capacities and, in some cases, possibilities for learning that we simply wouldn't otherwise have. Some are the wrong choice, offering little more than a black hole that absorbs our precious instructional time and our willingness to experiment the next time around. But when we are able to bring together the right tool with the right task for the right student, the results are stunning. The trick is to be both open and critical, continually asking (and even demanding) why, how, and when.

Three Nonnegotiables

I have three "nonnegotiable" questions that lead instruction in my classroom, with or without the consideration of technology. The first is simply, "How does the task at hand help to empower my middle school students to be powerful communicators, rich thinkers, and compelling writers?" Content simply must come first. How do I lead students to close, rich engagement with literature? How can we work to communicate their understanding through powerful, effective writing? Perhaps we'll connect with a network of people via the Internet in order to support authentic assessment. Or maybe we'll use a weblog to lead students into multigenre, multimedia response writing. This first order of business ensures meaningful, authentic connection to our curriculum.

Second, I ask, "How does this technology allow us to 'do it better?'" Here, I look to add technology when it presents an opportunity beyond what we can do with paper, pencils, or any of the host of additional tools that fill our classroom toolkits. This means closely examining the unique capacities of the tool. What can we do with this tool that we simply can't do with anything else? In the case of a seventh-grade class where we are using Palm Pilots as writing tools, we didn't truly empower student learners until we considered how the tool was different from the single desktop computer sitting in the corner of the classroom. Beaming—the ability to send a document or image from one handheld unit to another with the tap of a stylus—was the unique element that allowed us to completely change how collaboration occurred during writing and reading workshop.

Sometimes this question yields little response, an indication that this is not a task that calls for technology. If using a technology doesn't take student readers and writers beyond what they can do without it, don't use it! Remember the formula: right tool, right task, right student. If any of those variables aren't firmly in place, the entire lesson can collapse on itself.

My third nonnegotiable question challenges me to ask, "Is this task a rigorous complement or alternative to existing curriculum?" Technology integration isn't about replacing the high-stakes experiences that enrich our curricula pre-technology. It's about tapping into the powerful tools at hand and empowering student reading, writing, and thinking.

The Tech-Savvy English Teacher

Technology integration absolutely requires change in the role of the English teacher. Not only do we need to work to facilitate student learning, but we also need to work to develop both our digital literacies and those of our students. In order to construct challenging curriculum and standards-based activities that effectively integrate technology into English instruction, teachers need to work as *instructional designers*. In this capacity, teachers become *resource managers*, juggling electronic files and resources, hardware and networks. Schools are beginning to support teachers' work by hiring instructional technology specialists or additional media specialists who work as advisors or teammates during technology-infused projects. Innovative programs pair teachers with tech-savvy students who work to maintain the hardware and network needs of the classroom, freeing teacher time for instructional design and student assessment. In other words, you don't have to do it all on your own.

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Teachers inevitably will also act as *researchers*, systematically posing questions, examining when it is appropriate and useful to integrate technology and when it is not, and following through with the implementation and evaluation of technology use (Pope and Golub, 2000). And finally, teachers need to work as *communication specialists*, a role "natural" to English teachers. The Internet allows classrooms to tap into an international network of people, the transformative potential of which allows for the development of exceptional writing and reading skills. Teachers must know both how to tap into this network and to, again, facilitate

experiences that extend students' thinking as writers, readers, and communicators.

What you *do not* need to become is a technology expert. Becoming "tech-savvy," requires only two basic skills: You need to be able to find "on," and you need to be able to think critically about how to use the tools you have to enhance, extend, and empower student learning. You simply must acknowledge that the computer can either impede or enhance instructional opportunities, depending on the situation. That's it. The rest can be learned.

Please note that this definition of "tech-savvy" doesn't include understanding the logistics behind establishing a network or knowing how to repair hardware, and you might need to protect yourself from those misplaced expectations once your colleagues start to learn about the journey you plan to take. The tech-savvy teacher knows how to ask questions and, more important, who to question. This teacher seeks out training and eagerly taps into the knowledge base of media specialists, librarians, computer support specialists, computer science teachers, parents, and, most of all, students. Grounded in reality, this is also the teacher who has a back-up plan for those times when errors occur and equipment fails. Taking on the role of the tech-savvy teacher doesn't mean that you become a "techie." You don't have to abandon your beloved, tattered, and faded copy of Webster's dictionary in favor of the newest edition housed on the latest, greatest handheld PC. It simply means that you are empowering students to become digitally literate communicators.

Stepping into the Classroom

Room 162 is bursting with curious, energized seventh graders who are the first ones to admit their own technological strengths and weaknesses. They range from the tech-savviest to the most hesitant. Comments at the start of the school year ranged from statements of confidence ("I can't learn enough.") to declarations of blatant fear ("Teachers are always telling me what I don't know about computers or yelling when I screw something up."). One student explained, "I would rather have an interactive, online set of resources than text trapped on the pages of a book I have to lug around all day." Another offered an out-and-out plea, "I just wish that my teachers were less afraid of what we *could* do and created a chance for us to show what we *can* do."

One of the hardest lessons I learned when bringing technology into my teaching was that students don't know all that we assume they know. As a young teacher, I made the treacherous assumption that students knew what they were doing because they appeared so at ease sitting in front of a workstation, putting fingers to keys, busily tackling the assigned task. As English teachers, we never expect students to select a book and work their minds through it without first preparing them with strategies, expectations, and tools for unpacking what they might find. Why is it, then, that we allow students to access information online without similar tools?

Students in this seventh-grade class talked about the frustrations they felt as they tried to become savvy, skilled Internet users when adults were simply more at ease with the more static roles of reader, viewer, and listener. They wanted to try new hardware tools, but couldn't find support, let alone access. Students were excited that they'd managed to teach themselves to use much of what was made available to them, but frustrated that teachers could rarely take their understanding further than they'd taken it on their own. As much as students were empowered by their independent explorations, they welcomed the opportunity to have experiences in school that would extend that knowledge even further. Students were hungry to complete interactive, engaging, tech-infused activities in class—and to extend our classroom community beyond the classroom walls through discussions and virtual correspondence with students around the globe.

What this *didn't* mean was an overhaul of my curriculum or a flurry of juggling schedules and changing classrooms to get tools into my students' hands. It did mean a critical, paced examination of what I taught, whom I taught, and how I taught.

It meant following my list of nonnegotiables even during times where administrative pressures made the tide quite choppy.

We wrote with weblogs in order to provide students access to an interactive, multimedia writing space that demanded precision, economy, and active participation. Collaborative online projects (i.e., the Favorite Poem Project @www.favoritepoemproject.org) invited even my most struggling students to enter into a community of readers and writers who were deeply engaged with rich poetic texts. Interactive tools like the Poetry Forge (www.poetryforge.org) challenged us to explore how language works to convey meaning, tapping into the unique community and interactive capacities of that online tool. We explored the now-visible reading process through visual think-alouds using digital video tools like iMovie. Technology didn't appear in all lessons, only those that allowed us to do it better. Again, it was all about the right tool with the right student and the right task.

Ending Points

Jeff Wilhelm (2000) challenged us two years ago to consider whether we will "surf on the crest of the future's breaking wave—which will be exciting, scary, and outrageously fun—or . . . drown in it." Perhaps one of the most exciting things about considering what rich, meaningful technology integration can introduce into our classrooms is the fact that we have yet to really know what is yet to come and how it will all shake out. If it takes a generation to unlock the potential of a transformative technology, we certainly are seeing that play out in our classrooms now. The technology is trickling up, and I believe that, ultimately, the digital divide will no longer be about accessing the tangible equipment but about having the skills needed to mindfully access, probe, extend, launch, and configure the tools at hand.

So what does it take to be a tech-savvy English teacher? A little vision. A lot of patience. The openness and willingness to take risks. The belief that students can benefit from a rich and compelling melding of the right tool with the right task. Enough creativity to see what unique ideas will bring the most to your students' experiences. And, perhaps most important of all, the drive to continue learning from the community of learners within every classroom and every school.

References

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