The CEA Forum

Summer/Fall 2006: 35.2

SPECIAL SECTION: TEACHING AND TECHNOLOGY

SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ENGLISH TEACHER?

TECHNOLOGY, LITERACY, AND LANGUAGE ARTS

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Introduction

So you want to be an English teacher? At one time, that question suggested a career filled with instruction in reading and writing as well as grammar and vocabulary—in other words, traditional literacy. However, the integration of technology into education, in particular, secondary English education, challenges that notion. Today, it is not enough to be a "teacher of English"; instead, 21st-century English teachers must utilize and impart a number of literacies in their classrooms. Cindy Selfe explains this new definition of literacy(ies) as one that goes beyond reading and writing to include meaningful comprehension and utilization of technology; in other words, "digital literacy" (qtd. in Pianfetti 256). A problem is evident, though, in that studies by M.L. McNabb and others suggest that English teachers lack proper training in technological pedagogies (117) and, as a result, are often not as digitally literate as they should be. Furthermore, Evangeline Pianfetti writes that although "pre-service teachers are the key to technology integration in the classroom, they lack the confidence and feel ill-prepared in their abilities to engage students with technology in a meaningful way" (256). Bob Reising and Carol Pope, in their article, "Technology in Language Arts Teacher Education," note this problem as well and state that technology has added to "the existing conundrum that teacher educators face—the duality of teaching the content of courses as well as the implicit pedagogy or application of that content." To put it simply, the demands of content acquisition coupled with traditional as well as emerging technological pedagogies can create a cumbersome "to do list" for pre-service teachers.

The challenge, then, lies in adequately preparing pre-service language arts teachers to work in technology-enriched classrooms. In particular, teacher preparation programs must provide strategies that enable pre-service language arts teachers to develop and increase both traditional and digital literacies among their future students. Unfortunately, research over the past decade indicates that many teacher preparation programs are not sufficiently answering this challenge. Studies conducted by both the National Council for the Accreditation of

Teacher Education Task Force on Technology and Teacher Education (1997) and the International Society for Technology in Education (ITSE) (1999) indicate that many pre-service teachers are receiving inadequate instruction in the use of technological pedagogies (Pianfetti 257). Furthermore, Pianfetti cites Mousand from "Will New Teachers be Prepared to Teach in the Digital Age?" as arguing that "student teachers need more opportunities to apply instructional technology during field experiences under qualified supervision, and faculty should be encouraged to model and integrate technology" in their own classrooms (257).

A step in the right direction can be seen in that recent standards issued by ITSE (2000) delineate specific competencies pre-service teachers should master before graduation in order to obtain digital literacy (Pianfetti 257). Likewise, educators such as Reising and Pope and SUNY's Nancy Deal are taking it upon themselves to rectify the situation by implementing and modeling technological pedagogies in their own classrooms. As a former high school English teacher and current educator of pre-service teachers, I, too, am re-evaluating my own use of technological pedagogies and examining the possibilities of how technological instruction can enhance both my teaching as well as that of my students. This article is a result of such introspection and strives to meet that challenge of improving the technological aspects of language arts teacher preparation.

Towards a Technology/Language Arts Partnership

Technology in the language arts classroom may seem an unlikely partnership even with the acceptance of Selfe's redefinition of literacy and the English teacher's traditional role as facilitator of literacy. The reality is that language arts teachers, though interested in implementing technology into instruction, often rely on "'computer teachers' in 'labs'" to act as the experts in technologically-based instruction (McNabb 117). Furthermore, Deal attests that English majors are often stereotyped as "techno-phobes," and she sees this "fear" first-hand as she guides her English methods students through her self-created "Cyber-Quests," which are designed "to provide a structure for the exploration of English and language arts material on the Web." Simply put, CyberQuests supply a framework from which students can investigate a book, author, time period, etc. from a home page by following secure links from one point to another. Study questions, streaming video, and interactive chats may also be elements of the CyberQuest, and teachers can either construct their own or use "ready-made" CyberQuests found on the Web. Following the completion of her CyberQuest exercise, one of Deal's students commented: "'This Web site helps lessen the fear of technology for me . . . As someone who doesn't take advantage of the possibilities found in this technology, I was happy to find so much relevant material so readily'"(qtd. in Deal).

Similar to Deal, Reising and Pope, respectively of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke and North Carolina State University, incorporated a technological partnership within their language arts teacher education programs, in an effort "to boost. . . students' use of and skill in technology, as well as their confidence and skill in teaching writing." This partnership paired students in Reising and Pope's teacher preparation courses with middle school students; the language arts students interacted via email with the middle school students and provided feedback, comments, and advice on the students' writing samples. In evaluation, Reising and Pope write that

> both the university and middle school students revealed a
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> great enthusiasm for the exchange, for the quality of their
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> connection, and for the advances they had made as writers
>
> and teachers of writing . . .Technology, pedagogy, and a
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> university-school partnership had made this project a success!

Examples such as Deal's and Reising and Pope's suggest that faculty efforts to improve pre-service teachers'

abilities and confidence in the use of technological pedagogies hold much promise. Patrick Foster writes, "Technology activities could easily provide rich contexts with which to apply mathematics, [and] language"; likewise, Sarah Porter argues that technology clearly can contribute to teaching literary studies (317). Pre-service language arts teachers just need the models and the practice to increase their comfort level in employing technology for these purposes. As Pianfetti states, "There has been a shift from teachers needing to know about technology in terms of hardware and software operations to teachers needing to know how to integrate technology into the curriculum" (256)—and that integration can best be discovered, created, and practiced in teacher preparation programs.

Technology Meets Language Arts

As stated earlier, one of the reasons pre-service language arts teachers may be hesitant to implement technological pedagogies is because they are already burdened with content, standards, and their own feelings of inexperience and inadequacy. Porter explains, too, that implementing new pedagogies takes time—something new teachers may have precious little of. She writes: "Generally in the arts and humanities disciplines, there is little evidence of technology applied to teaching and learning saving academics preparation and teaching time, and in fact the adoption of new technology frequently makes additional demands on teaching staff" (317). While Porter's argument may be valid, this planning time could be lessened with appropriate exposure to technological pedagogies during teacher preparation courses (as well the English faculty's use, in general, of technological pedagogies in their own classrooms). In other words, if pre-service teachers are exposed to their *own* teachers' use of technological pedagogies, then they will have a store of methods to model once they enter their own classrooms. Furthermore, the time invested in creating and implementing technological pedagogies is well spent, in that these teaching methods benefit not only the students, but also the teachers. The article"Teaching English: Information and Communication Technologies" states that for students, technology can "be very motivational"; "fun"; and "help students to produce excellent published work." Porter concurs, and adds that technology allows students to have more control over their own learning, and lets students "communicate and discuss ideas together, even when they are not physically (or temporally) together" (317). Likewise, for teachers, technology can "allow for the easy production, storage, and retrieval of prepared materials"; facilitate "communication with other teachers [and with students]"; and "help teachers to find information easily" ("Teaching"). Thus, when language arts teachers implement technology, everyone wins—and digital literacy is likely to increase alongside traditional literacy, for both students and teachers.

Technological Pedagogies—Purpose and Practice

Before jumping on the technology bandwagon, though, language arts teachers need to assess their purpose(s) for integrating technology into their classroom and avoid implementing technology for technology's sake. Susan Cramer and Annette Smith caution that "when computers are used to mirror traditional practice and teach lower-order thinking skills (i.e., replacing paper and pencil worksheets with computer-based drill and practice programs), student achievement drops." Porter concurs, and writes:

> We need to look beyond the immediate focus of content that is
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> specific to a single subject area to consider, at a higher level, the
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> methodologies that are being used towards successful teaching, and
>
> thus be able to make informed decisions about whether an application
>
> of technology will enhance or dilute the teaching-learning situation. (323)

Therefore, pre-service language arts teachers, and those who instruct them, must consider carefully the goals attached to their digital literacy projects. Instead of just using computers as "glorified typewriters," language arts

teachers must contemplate exactly how technology can help them develop the whole of their students' literacies. In other words, how can technological pedagogies foster students' abilities to read, write, think critically and analytically, and develop an awareness of community and audience?

In the March 2002 edition of *English Journal* , Trevor Owen quotes Richard Jester, Language Arts department chair at Austin Middle School in Amarillo, Texas as asking: “What if multimedia were used more as part of the process to develop the writing and reading skills we believe are so important?” In his classroom, Jester challenges students' higher order thinking skills by having them complete book presentation projects that utilize multimedia. For Jester, these projects encourage process writing, since “'students can change wording so quickly and effortlessly;'” likewise, since “'deleting, adding, and rewriting are [just] a few mouse clicks away,'” students “take more chances” as writers (qtd. in Owen). Jester also uses these technological opportunities to insert grammar and punctuation lessons since information can be moved around with a simple cut and paste action; he states: “The vast landscape of words on paper prevents many students from recognizing individual mistakes. With the slides of a multimedia project, students can center on small sections of writing at a time without the distraction of seeing all the other paragraphs around it” (qtd. in Owen).

Like Jester, I have witnessed the positive effects technology can have in facilitating students' writing processes. Individual class sessions of my College Writing I and II courses are often held in the computer lab where students can utilize Blackboard to share topic ideas and refine their thesis statements through Discussion Board threads or small group chats. Pre-writing, outlining, and drafting activities can then be accomplished utilizing the web tools available, and “studio reviews” can be implemented. Modeled after a method used by Dr. Kristine Blair in her graduate courses at Bowling Green State University, studio reviews allow students to play a “musical chairs” of sorts—moving from one monitor to the next, reading and analyzing drafts, and then responding (directly to an open document on the screen) with questions, comments, and suggestions. In this case, technology takes peer review to a new level; it is immediate, comes from multiple sources, and gives students both an awareness of audience as well as a context from which to judge their own ideas and writing in relation to that of their peers. The comment tool in Microsoft Word can also be utilized for instructor or peer review of drafts and fosters a dialogue of sorts in the margins of student papers, since students can more readily read these typed suggestions or queries versus the pen scrawls that generally fill the landscape of these margins. I argue that “dialogue” is appropriate here, in that students tend to respond more readily (usually via email, in my experience) to these comments than they ever did to my handwritten suggestions. Furthermore, features such as the comment tool can be used by students themselves to reflect upon and analyze their own drafts in progress. Electronic or printed versions of these various drafts can then chronicle the various stages of a particular student's writing process.

The article “10 Techniques to Change Your Teaching” also includes ideas for integrating technological pedagogies that go beyond substituting a computer and keyboard for a spiral notebook and pen. This article, published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* acknowledges that while “the jury is still out on whether computers have led to a revolutionary improvement in the quality of teaching,” research indicates that integrating technological pedagogies can have an immediate positive impact on classroom instruction, since students respond well to the literal “hands on” interaction of “wired” learning. Specific examples of technological pedagogies applicable to the language arts classroom can be found in Terry Thode's “Reading and Writing And Technology Education! It's All About Communication!” which suggests that those working to implement technology into instruction begin with email, digital cameras, interactive web sites, and IPods, since these are places where teachers “can capitalize on student interest” while still meeting curriculum goals for traditional literacy (2). To elaborate on Thode's ideas, students from various classes could respond to one another's writings via virtual “pen pals,” and digital cameras could record visual elements of a narrative or snap the details of nature perfect for illustrating a children's book version of Thoreau's *Walden*. In addition, interactive websites, such as the aforementioned CyberQuest, could transport students to Steinbeck's Depression Era, *Grapes of Wrath*, or enable them to discuss, via blogs, the finer points of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth*. Likewise, IPods could be used to analyze song lyrics for specific rhyme schemes and metaphors or to share a mix of jazz music fit to accompany Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Furthermore, Thode suggests that students in the language arts

classroom could use technology to produce books, videos, and presentations (2). Again, to elaborate, traditional poetry lessons could evolve into online poetry writing, revising, and then "publishing," with each student creating his/her own poetry booklet or poetry website complete with stylistic elements of color, graphic, font, and even audio (here a program, such as MacIntosh's Dreamweaver, would be helpful). Oral presentations, such as "how to" speeches could evolve into "how to" videos shot and produced by students individually or in small groups—a variation of this is to have students write, produce, and videotape "newscasts." Technology could also be used to research and then create Power Point, slide show, or poster presentations of texts read or authors studied—all a far cry from yesterday's dry book reports.

While technological pedagogies lend themselves to writing and literature instruction in a number of ways, as the aforementioned examples show, what about grammar and vocabulary instruction? If grammar is taught in the context of writing (as seen in Jester's example), technology creates an ease with which to cut and paste various sentence elements in order to create clauses, combine sentences, and overall, tinker with sentence variation. In addition, instructors can find "teachable moments" by discussing the various colored "squiggles" that appear as markers of grammatical errors in Word documents. Another option for studying language, grammar, and vocabulary via technology is to incorporate a space(s) for a classroom or individual "commonplace book." This could easily be done by adapting Laura R. Micciche's suggestions in "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar," from a paper to a virtual format. Micciche explains that commonplace books were used during Renaissance times as a "'storehouse of materials to be remembered or quoted'" (724), and suggests that contemporary teachers utilize commonplace books as spaces where students "can document and comment on their evolving relationship to writing and grammatical concepts" (724). In Micciche's version, the teacher keeps a commonplace book (notebook) on her desk where students record everything from grammatical questions to interesting language, lines of prose and poetry, or vocabulary examples. Periodically, then, the teacher refers to the commonplace book for class discussion, instruction, mini-lessons, etc. An online version of the commonplace book could be created in a classroom blog space or in simple individual document form and then shared via email, chats, or other online exchange. In any of these forms, the commonplace book would maintain its ability to "encourage students to read and analyze texts as skillfully crafted documents that convey and perform different kinds of meaning—among them, aesthetic, rhetorical, and political" (724). In other words, it would promote their various "literacies."

Conclusion

So you want to be an English teacher? The 21st-century job description for that career includes more than just preparation for instruction of traditional literacy. As Pianfetti states, "Ensuring that teachers are technologically [digitally] literate promises opportunities for students to gain literacy, numeracy, creativity, equality, and responsibility"; furthermore, Pianfetti adds that "teachers need to be digitally literate so that they can empower students with the skills and knowledge they will need to be successful in a workplace dominated by technology" (260). Granted, technology may not be a "magic cure" for increasing student learning (Cramer, et. al.); however, when used appropriately, technological pedagogies can be a timely, interesting, and student-centered approach to instruction. The key, though, is in teacher preparation, since successful implementation of these pedagogies will only occur when "teachers feel confident enough with the technologies" to "share them with their students" (Pianfetti 260). For that reason, those of us who instruct, mentor, and advise would-be English teachers need to model best technological practices in order to foster *our* students' abilities to adequately develop *their* students' digital as well as traditional literacies.

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