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Next: Heuristics in the English Classroom

INCORPORATING DIGITAL LITERACY

INTO THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Suanna Davis

As freshman composition instructors, we are challenged to teach our students to write, a practice which is easier if they are motivated and interested. This is particularly important for students coming from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) because there are multiple obstacles that must be overcome (Greene and Forster). A real world writing situation with an immediate and focused audience would be optimal for student involvement, but most freshman composition classes are still limited to small group interaction and teacher-focused writing because of historical and institutional expectations. There is, however, a community created, established, and maintained solely through reading and writing which is ubiquitous in the twenty-first century and which our students can be engaged in and with to the enrichment of their academic experience: the discourse community of the internet.

The pervasiveness of the internet in modern America is often seen as a detriment to students, when they use leetspeak to write and no longer recognize that the correct spelling of the word "before" is not the letter b followed by the numeral four (Lee 486). If we presuppose that our students are already computer savvy because of their age, however, we are doing some of them a disservice. While a Pew survey indicates that 77% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 use the internet, that leaves 23% who do not (Lenhart, Smith, Macgill, and Arafeh). Though many students are already fluent participants in net writing, there are other students, even in today's colleges, who have never used the internet for anything other than required registration and email. To most students from a low socioeconomic background, the internet, if they use it at all, is simply a new kind of mailbox, sitting empty and collecting junk mail which occasionally needs to be thrown away or not, depending on the capacity of their server (Rothbaum, Martland, and Jannsen). I have been teaching in a college where a large part of the population is basically computer illiterate because they are economically disadvantaged. I know that mine is not the only college that serves this population. Thankfully, the administration at the college has recognized the impact of class disadvantage on computer literacy and has mandated an introduction to computers in all general education classes because the ability to work in our high tech world requires at least rudimentary high tech skills.

For the college, this meant giving the students on-campus email addresses and mandating that the teachers use theirs. And for the English department, it meant requiring them to do research online, through the library database. However, these requirements were still fairly minimal and might not have done a lot for the students' computer literacy, since it would have focused on school-only internet usage. Since we know that students compartmentalize knowledge (Abbott and Nantz), this limitation of the computer to school-centered projects could further isolate their computer knowledge ("Theory and Research-Based Principles of Learning"). This level of usage did not seem to me to be adequate because I understood that my students did not have experience with the internet that would bring them up to par with students of higher SES (Rothbaum, Martland, and Jannsen). I decided that there was room within the freshman composition classroom to address and attempt to minimize this disparity. This was successfully implemented and achieved.

I began by requiring that papers be typed, a requirement that is considered basic at many colleges. This was more of an imposition for some students than for others. I introduced various aspects of Microsoft Word in class, trying to make sure that the students understood how to use it. Then I found out I had not gone far enough. Some of my students did not know that the shift key made capital letters and they always put the caps lock key on to start a sentence. They also did not know that the tab would indent for paragraphs. So, while some students were happily completing their homework in class, other students were getting private tutoring on how to use a keyboard. They were interested in learning it, knowing that this would be important for their future, and they learned to type adequately, if not quickly. Since interest impacts attention, goals, and levels of learning, this simple in-class requirement improved student involvement in class (Hidi and Renninger 111) with only a small time requirement from me as a teacher.

My second step was to discuss vocabulary. I introduced the internet and the world wide web. In class I defined web addresses, or URLs, sites, and blogs. I did not define the term post and when I used it consistently, a student asked what it meant. Sometimes as teachers, even when we think we are being careful, we are not going back far enough to reach our students where they are. After that, we discussed why someone would want to know something they didn't already know and I suggested that the internet could be useful in completing class assignments. I introduced several search engines, including Google, Live Search, and Yahoo. I told them that when I didn't know how to do something, I often went to Google and put in search terms. I then gave them a specific example of a time when I did that. Then I suggested various search terms for a single search that I might be doing and looked them up while the students watched. This was an example of modeling, which began a process of scaffolding that continued throughout the course (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 201). I did this just before our definition/illustration paper.

The next step in their education in computer literacy came with that paper. After I presented the definition of an abstract

noun and fifty possible abstract nouns which they could define and give examples of, I asked them how they would go about creating a definition. They suggested looking in the dictionary. I told them that was true and asked if there was a way to look up definitions on the web. One student said Merriam-Webster. (This particular student was the only one of fifty with a MySpace page.) So we put as search terms the word definition and an abstract noun. I showed them that Google's first search return would be web definitions of the noun. This, I said, would give them several different variations of a meaning, but it could also give them very specialized meanings as well. I looked up several and talked through them with the students, modeling the approach I wanted them to take.

While we were still in class, I had the students look up one of the abstract nouns. I told them it did not have to be the one they wrote their paper on, but that I wanted to make sure they were able to do this on their own. They were. The homework assignment for that class included choosing an abstract noun and printing out definitions for it as well as deciding on their own definition for the word, a necessity for postmodern vocabulary.

Then in our discussion of the definition paragraph, the introduction for the definition/illustration paper, I suggested that they might look up quotes about their word online. This might give them an idea of something they would want to include in their introductory paragraph. The students then had a search term to use. In class they looked for quotations about their topic. I showed them how to capture the URL for their quote and then took them through unrelated websites searching for authors and publication dates for the quote, again modeling the process. After that I had the students search the websites they had used for definitions and quotes for those things. Some of them were more successful than others in finding them. And some of their sites listed neither the author nor a date of publication. But we searched together and I would come and help them look, suggesting they check the home page, if there was one, for the site. Thus we built experience with and success in computer searches.

This gave the students a feeling of accomplishment and showed them how to use the net to find something they needed for a paper they were actually writing. It was a small step towards integrating the internet as a learning tool, but it was successful because it triggered situational interest in the internet (Hidi and Renninger 111). However, simply triggering interest was not sufficient to get them and keep them involved with the internet. I wanted to integrate their computer use into the class work and maintain situational interest as well.

One way to do this is to have the students email an in-progress paper and comment on the paper through the email. A single paragraph, such as the definition paragraph for the definition/illustration paper, is excellent for this because it breaks the work into multiple pieces for students, to keep them from being overwhelmed, and it allows them to be certain that they are going in the right direction. This encourages motivation because the more students know they know, the more they are interested in learning (�Theory and Research-Based Principles of Learning�). It is also more likely to produce success, an important component of optimizing the internet as a learning environment.

Integrating their computer use into their understanding of studying and learning required continuing to broaden our approach to the internet. The ideal opportunity presented itself in our next assignment, the compare/contrast paper.

Since this was a presidential election year and my students are generally eighteen or over, I thought it might be interesting for them to write about the presidential candidates and their platforms. Because I learned from asking the students that political involvement was low among them generally, I found several quizzes the students could take which would inform them of how their views matched with various candidates' views. The students enjoyed the online quizzes and some of them were amazed at which candidates most closely aligned with their views. All the students took at least two quizzes, to cut out possible bias, and many took three, since we had sufficient time to do that. The students were mostly politically uninvolved and unaware, but one brought up the NPR discussion about whether black women should vote their race or their gender (Brand). I suggested that they should vote according to the issues, which dovetailed nicely with the quizzes. I wish I could always tie their questions back to the assignment for the day so well.

As part of this section, I pointed out that the last day to register to vote in the Texas primaries was coming soon and that students needed to go register. We discussed the number of candidates who had already dropped out of the race, the strength of the race, and the fact that votes in Texas would make a difference in the national election. This discussion gave them a feeling that they could have power or influence on the election (Evans). Multiple students went and registered to vote. After the primaries, several students came in to class and announced that they had voted.

After the students had an introduction to the candidates and their positions on issues from the quizzes, I backed up a little and we discussed blogs more specifically. I introduced blogs historically, through a reading in our textbook (Mead 456). Then I asked them to describe what kinds of topics were mentioned as being blog post fodder. I mentioned which topics seemed more prevalent to me as a daily reader of 64 blogs. Then we looked at Carnegie Mellon's 100 must-read blog list of 2006 (Leskovec, Krause, Guestrin, Faloutsos, VanBriesen, and Glance). I told them that since the blog list was over a year old, many of the blogs might be defunct. Various sources estimate the number of blogs between 2 and 16 million with 60 to 80 percent of those abandoned (Arnold). Students were given two blogs each to examine for possible usefulness in a paper on the presidential campaign, or three if one was abandoned. Many of Carnegie Mellon's 100 were either no longer functioning or not relevant. One student was particularly virulent in his disdain for one of the blogs he looked at: "It's a cat blog. Why would anyone want to read a cat blog?" Each class examined half of the list (an example might be seen here). Most of the blogs were found to not be relevant to this particular paper. However, looking them up gave the students two examples of blogs which were considered to be important. They now not only had a theoretical definition, but also personal experience with at least skimming two blogs. This increased both their internet skills and their reading experience, by integrating a previous skill of reading with a new medium. Today students are expected to understand the current state of their knowledge and to build on it and improve on it (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 194); this exercise gave students a chance to do this in a safe environment.

The compare/contrast paper had students using internet sources only to examine two candidates' views on a subject which the students thought was important (see examples here and here). Most of the students chose universal health care as their topic, though some chose immigration or abortion. They used the search engines and found the candidates' pages easily. They also used their topic as a search term and found other good sources. In class I re-introduced how to cite internet sources. Then each student took one of their sources and wrote a citation on the board. No one got it perfect, but by the end of the class period several of the students could tell the person at the board what their problem was. This was definitely a collaborative effort to get the citations right.

The next assignment was the research paper, using the library database. There were no paper sources for this document either; it was all internet. The students were a little amazed at the difference in the length of the articles they had been finding on the internet themselves and those which were in the database. I pointed out that one source was academic and one source was more focused on news and entertainment. They could see the reason for the differences in length then.

This was a research paper on a controversial topic and I had them find sources both for and against their position. They used the articles which supported their position to write their long documented report. Then they used the articles that disagreed with their position to write an argument detailing a problem with their opponents' views. I wanted them to understand that there were arguments for both sides that were reasonable, since that was a requirement for it being a controversial topic.

The students all used academic sources for this paper, except a student (one of the two internet experts in the classes) who was out of town during the introductory phase of the research paper. Her first version of the long documented paper used only popular articles on her topic. But the other students either understood the difference between the two types of information or at least understood the directions to use the database articles only for their research papers. They wrote good papers. The use of the web for a third paper in a row created a sustained interest in the internet. It also gave the students success in using the internet in various ways for different kinds of information. It was also, I hoped, giving them a strong sense of the internet as a learning tool.

At this point I moved away from traditional essays. I asked the students for their areas of expertise. At first they seemed to think I was tricking them: a teacher was soliciting them about their knowledge? But when I explained that everyone was good at something and I knew that was true of them as well, and when they realized I really wanted to know what they were good at, they came up with long lists of things, from child care to balancing a checkbook to playing soccer. I asked them to choose three that they were interested in learning more about and spending time on. Then I re-introduced the concept of a links post and gave them that as their next assignment. Students were using their own knowledge and the internet to find, compile, and summarize multiple sites which offered useful information within their area of expertise. This was all done outside of class as a homework assignment over a week long period. Examples can be seen in "The United States Army," "Aerosmith to the Max," and "Dental Hygienist." The development of their internet skills showed in that not a single student called me for help or questions, a common occurrence in these classes.

I hoped this assignment of creating a links post related to their personal expertise would create or build on an emerging individual interest in the internet (Hidi and Renninger). This assignment took the students from a purely academic use of the internet, though in various forms, to an academic pursuit of information on the internet that integrated new knowledge and skills with abilities and interests they already possessed. I was hoping that this would take the isolated and disconnected concept of internet use and organize it into a larger, more coherent view of the internet.

After developing the links posts, which allowed the students success in writing a blog post without having to create content, the students were ready to move on to the next challenges. I had the students write a personal blog post, a six-word autobiography, their strongest memory, an important person in their lives—a short disguised narrative paper. Then I had them write an informational blog post, telling about something they knew well. Many of the students used their research paper or the compare/contrast paper to create their informational blog post (examples may be found here, here, and here).

One of the student's posts was noted and read by a regular internet user. That student had written about the need for a cornerback for the Houston Texans. This blog post was linked from the reader's blog. When I told the student his post had been linked, he thought he had done something wrong. We still had a ways to go! But after I explained, he was excited to know that someone else, not even someone who was in my classes, was reading his work.

It was around this time, when they had started writing posts, that I tried integrating them into the internet community in various ways. I gave them assignments, assigned them names within the blog, and allowed and encouraged cross-commenting. Students were meeting others who graduated from their high schools or were in their phase of life. They were encouraging others who were in a hard place. They were laughing together and sharing interesting post reading and writing experiences. The funniest was when a student thought a post was on "pooping" when it was on "popping" a baby out. Students across the two classes were relating to each other and beginning to create comment threads. It was becoming their blog as their writing came to dominate it. The results of this can be seen at www.davisenglish.com, particularly for April of 2008.

As teachers we can help our students develop life skills they need, including how to integrate old and new skills, while increasing their writing and reading skills and encouraging their completion of college by involving them in an academic community (Draper). All of this can be done using the internet. I know it can make a difference because I have done it in my classroom. These students, coming from a lower socioeconomic status which usually precludes computer literacy, developed not only more mature writing skills, but also better reading skills and higher computer fluency through the time in this freshman composition class.

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Suanna Davis is presently an adjunct teaching composition across all levels at Lone Star College and Houston Baptist University in Houston, TX. Dr. Davis's relevant presentations include "Bridging the Gap: Ensuring Information Literacy and Sustainable Learning across Socioeconomic Backgrounds,ﷺ Computers and Writing, June 2009; "The Pen and the Byte Offer Different Benefits,ﷺ State of the Profession. Conference of College Teachers of English, March 2009; and "Ensuring Information Literacy in Low Socioeconomic Students: Giving Them What They Need to Complete College,ﷺ Two Year College Association-Southwest, November 2008.

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