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The Power of Technology to Inspire Students and Teachers in English Language Arts Classrooms

DAVID MEDICUS and SUSAN NELSON WOOD

Florida State University

The Challenge of Technology

We spent years resisting technology; they had to drag us into the high tech age kicking and screaming! We are English language arts teachers who love books and nice notebooks, good pens, and fresh paper. But when our schools adopted a computerized absentee reporting and grading system, we had to learn to turn the computer on. We were on a path that would change our teaching forever. Technology will never replace good teaching, but it does have the potential to enhance good teaching and engage students more actively with the texts and the writing process. As teachers of English language arts and English educators, we strive to use multiple methodologies to invite students in to "the literacy club."

We knew that students needed a variety of stimuli and have often used photographs, slide shows, video clips, and music to involve students in the reading and writing process. By using PowerPoint, a software program that enables users to create visuals either on the computer or for an overhead slide projector, the students are able to "animate" the literary works. At first flashy and high-tech, the too-stale templates, overly long bulleted text, and clichéd clipart have conspired to turn even PowerPoint presentations into a digital chalkboard. However, sound not the death toll for Microsoft's software. The problem does not lie in the program but in how it's being used. Students and teachers enjoy the creative aspect of it, trying to entice the class into going through the PowerPoint presentation, sneaking the "work" part of the technology-based lessons right by the students. The technology available now makes it so easy to create a visually attractive and stimulating product that lures the students in and gets them excited about the books they're reading.

Technology allows the teacher to turn what had once been solely an instrument for giving notes into an interactive, thought provoking, and stimulating entity. Technology allows the teacher to write in any style, thanks to the abundance of fonts available for free downloading online. While giving a presentation on Edgar Allan Poe, using the "chiller" font lends our words a creepy, horror-show effect. For the study of Shakespeare, employing an Old English font provides authenticity and sparks interest. Students become curious about our fonts, and one student will always ask to know the name of a particular font and where to download it. When students then turn in creative written works using unique fonts, their pride and sense of accomplishment challenges us even more. Many excellent free fonts are available at:

http://www.thefreesite.com/Free_Fonts/. Once the fonts are downloaded at home, they must also be installed on the school computer in the fonts directory.

PowerPoint presentations are also wonderful ways to interject laughter into our classes. For a lecture on American Romanticism after questioning students how they interpret "romanticism," flashing a picture of Fabio can lead to lively discussion. Adding humor to PowerPoint presentations makes our job as teachers that much more fun and invigorating. PowerPoint software has become a valuable tool for providing images to students. While studying Chief Joseph, showing Native American portraits and having students select a portrait and write a speech in the voice of that person adds an authenticity to the material which helps students understand the significance of Chief Joseph's speech. During the study of *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, we chose a Cézanne painting entitled *Woman Seated in Blue* as a representation of Willy's wife Linda accompanied by some relevant quotes such as, "He's been trying to kill himself," and "What happened to the love you had for him?" Color printers enable us to print and laminate these extraordinary tools to spark imagination and dialogue. Images on the computer screen possess the potential to turn reading aloud into dramatic presentations and involve students in the text. English educators can create links to websites to enhance lecture and/or discussion and insert video clips to demonstrate important concepts and practices.

We try our best to create an active learning environment through technology, affording the students an opportunity to respond to the tasks in their own personal way, leaving room for plenty of personal interpretation. By creating innovative, exciting and interesting curricular materials, we generate and encourage student work that is creative, exciting, and interesting as well.

Ideas for Incorporating Technology into the English Language Arts Class

Ideas for incorporating technology into the English Language arts class are limited only by our understanding of meaning and effect. Purposeful, elegant integration requires clear thinking about why a particular technological tool makes sense in a given learning experience. Considering the ultimate aims of the curriculum, what medium and method work best?

Certainly, technological tools such as tape recorders, cameras, video cameras, computers, and scanners have become primary tools of inquiry as they provide students with the means for collecting data and supporting research. The technology fosters communication as it serves to build community by extending student work into the larger community. For example, our students have collected old photographs, read local historical documents, conducted oral histories, and created a community display for the public library. They have produced student radio shows, newspapers, and other community publications. They have participated in global conversations.

Just as it matters that student thinking and student work go beyond the English language arts classroom, so does it matter that the work come back full circle. Technology can support both processes. If hindsight is 20-20, then technology as a tool for reflection can serve almost any classroom well. Electronic mail, photography, video, and audio provide a mirror of experience, thereby offering us the opportunity to step back and take a second look. Some examples of learning in retrospect include *Making History of Us*, *These Are the Days*, *Ideas for Self-Analysis*, *Exhibits of Community History*, *Using Art and Photographs*, *Cultural Exchanges*,

Making History of Us

In an electronic learning journal, students take turns posting to the class listserv for all to read and respond. Each day, a member of the class makes notes during class and then writes a report posted electronically for all to read. The note must be more than mere summary recording the experience for those who may have missed it. In addition, reflection is required, modeled, and expected. Students synthesize, interpret, and extend the class experience, building on what has come before and moving the collective thinking forward. Creative approaches and high-interest readability are plusses.

In the following example, the author of the note recorded the experience, writing the collective history, but also interpreted it. In this particular case, in a methods course for English education majors, the student wrote from a highly personal perspective on the topic of professionalism:

Today was my day to record the class's discussion of professionalism, and what I learned was that professionalism is a huge topic. I began class by rushing to my seat. Out of breath, I copied some quotations written on the board. Why is it, I wondered, that I am running late the specific morning that we are talking about professionalism? Doesn't it always seem to be that way? I know now that the reason this is true is that professionalism or the lack of it follows you wherever you go. From the discussion, I realized that acting like a professional is probably going to be the hardest part of my job as an educator. We are going to be on stage as professional educators wherever we are, in the classroom, the hallways, the front office, on the phone with parents, and even in the grocery store.

Seated in a large circle, we began class by writing on one side of an index card ideas of what professionalism is or encompasses. A few of the things that were mentioned include 'being organized, being knowledgeable, having a commitment to work, being competent, being available, being well prepared, being punctual, being flexible, and anticipating and combating anarchy with humor.' On the other side of the card, we wrote questions and then passed them over to the guest speaker, a teacher from the local high school.

One of the values of this activity is in the authentic and informal dialogue that may ensue. Such immediate interaction occurs once the author publishes his/her reflection and classmates chime in with their responses. Like any good electronic discussion, a class list can enlarge and extend conversations that are lost when participants must wait for the next scheduled class time.

These Are the Days

A camera, especially a digital camera, is another tool that can be used to record classroom experiences. Pictures taken throughout the school year can be arranged and sorted in an attempt to better understand the phenomenon of experience over time. For example, as a culminating learning experience, we produce electronic slide shows set to music. As Natalie Merchant sings, "These Are the Days," images of our year flash in chronological order across the big screen. What do we notice? Many things may be revealed. We may barely recognize the first slides of students wearing nametags, sitting in order, lined up with serious intent, and reticent. Gradually

the images change as groups are formed, teams work together, and a community is created. Like any good documentary, the power of the medium is that it helps us know ourselves better.

Ideas for Self-Analysis

Other methods of self-assessment that work well in the English language arts classroom are made possible by technology. Video cameras and tape players document learning and provide opportunities to reflect on experiences. In our writing classes, such recorders capture student writing as it is read aloud.

Students have learned to see themselves as writers by watching videotaped sessions of writing workshops. In guided self-analysis, they are asked to make notes on what they notice. Certain observations have been especially powerful. For example, listening to the rhythm of their language in terms of sentence fluency and word choice has improved editing skills, and watching the response of the audience as writers read their work has also provided feedback about effective conventions.

We have also played with tape recorders as a way to assess writing. Students have submitted their taped comments along with a final draft in which they explain the story of their piece and ask for specific feedback. As instructors, we have them respond in kind, taping our suggestions and returning the same tape to the writer. Over time, the tape becomes something of a portfolio.

Exhibits of Community History

Technological tools such as tape recorders, cameras, video cameras, computers, and scanners provide students with the means for collecting data and supporting research. Our students have collected old photographs, read historical local documents, conducted oral histories, and created a community display for public libraries.

Using Art and Photographs

Teachers can use artwork in a host of ways in the English classroom, printing out paintings to laminate and use as inspiration for a short story or poem. When teaching Romanticism, teachers can use the paintings of the period to enhance the philosophies and thinking of the Romantics. Students can use the paintings as the setting of a story or imagine themselves interacting with the people in the painting. The paintings can also serve as the impetus for a character sketch or dialogue. We often instruct students to find a piece of art which reflects the theme of a work we are reading, inviting them to reflect on the paintings and their connection to the work through reader response journals, response papers, or explanatory essays. The following sites are excellent resources:

<http://www.nga.gov/collection/an.htm>

This site houses the National Gallery of Art Collection.

<http://www.spectrumvoice.com/art/index.html>

This site contains a vast number of artists and their works.

<http://www.fsu.edu/~CandI/maclay/paintings.htm>

This is a direct link to a site featuring art and another site featuring photography. The handouts in

[Appendix A](#), [B](#), and [C](#) describe to the students the artists and photographers on these sites.

We also include instructions on how to save the pictures to disk ([Appendix C](#)) so that we can collect their work in order to assess them. We then put together many of the images on a PowerPoint presentation to share with the class. This activity allows the students to explore the characters and themes in ways they may not have done before, and the technology available allows for an easy application.

One eleventh-grade general studies student in response to the short story *Babylon Revisited* by F. Scott Fitzgerald found a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz to portray the emotion of "I spoiled this city for myself. I didn't realize it but the days came along one after another and then two years were gone and everything was gone and I was gone." She wrote:

The city in the photo is ensconced in fog. Notice the man who is cleaning the sidewalk while it is still raining. This reminds me of how Charlie came back to Paris to face his past but it wouldn't go away. He tried to clear it but it was still there. Just like Charlie, the man in the picture can't wash the rain away.

For more examples of student writing and PowerPoint presentations, go to <http://www.fsu.edu/~CandI/ENGLISH/pow.htm>.

Cultural Exchanges

Students visit <http://www.epals.com/> where the class can connect and exchange e-mails with many other classrooms around the world. The teacher can either respond to classroom requests made by other teachers or request a classroom from around the world. For example, if we are teaching *The Joy Luck Club*, students can exchange e-mails with students from China and learn first-hand more about the culture, allowing students to engage in meaningful dialogue with actual students.

Examining Issues

The site <http://yforum.com/> stresses diversity and offers students the opportunity to respond to real life issues that may arise during the reading and/or discussion of a novel. Students can post their own opinions as well as reading the opinions of others.

Creative Writing

Stories can be started on the Internet and finished or continued by other students. Students may write stories in partnership with other classes or share ideas and get feedback over the Internet, creating a global community and enriching the learning experience in a cultural manner for the students. Students can publish their own work on <http://powa.org/>, a great site to aid students in the writing process. Web communities, conferencing online, allow students to create collaborative notebooks, stories, and debates. Such activities enhance integrated thinking, organizational skills, knowledge construction, and language.

It is almost impossible for teachers to keep up with the rapidly changing field of technology. Our

students are continually teaching us as we assume the roles of co-learners. In partnership with our students we learn many things about ourselves and each other, about taking risks and vulnerability, about technological successes and failures, and, most importantly, about the power of English.

Appendix A

Photographers

MAN RAY—experimental abstract

MUYBRIDGE—time-lapse photography to study animals in motion

ARBUS—disturbing portraits of contemporary, usually poor, Americans

ADAMS—nature studies (dramatic use of high contrast images)

EGGLESTON—contemporary documentary style color shots of the American scene

O'SULLIVAN—documented the American West in the late 1800's for the government

RIIS—his book is entitled *How the Other Half Lives*, "illuminating social injustice"

LANGE—documented the Great Depression, many haunting famous portraits

STIEGLITZ—experimental work, married to Georgia O'Keefe

SHERMAN—reenacts low budget horror movie stills with herself as the subject

Appendix B

Artists

Thomas Hart Benton—Midwestern landscapes, vibrant colors, big murals

Hieronymus Bosch—images of hell

Mary Cassatt—women and children images

Marc Chagall—Russian "artist of the fantastical" wild and folkloric

Salvador Dalí—surrealist painter

Edgar Degas—the arts of Paris, images of dancers, bars

El Greco—religious paintings, many images of Christ

Thomas Gainsborough—portraits of the upper class
Paul Gauguin—images of native islanders and rural French peasants
Vincent van Gogh—many self-portraits, sunflowers
Francisco de Goya—bizarre Spanish royalty paintings
Winslow Homer—images of America
Edward Hopper—images of isolation, post-Industrial America
Frida Kahlo—Mexican artist, many intriguing, unusual self-portraits
René Magritte—surrealist images, often humorous
Edouard Manet—portraits of Parisians
Claude Oscar Monet—landscapes and portraits
Berthe Morisot—images of women
Pablo Picasso—defies any categorization, find it all here
Rembrandt—lots of self portraits, peasants, and other portraits
Auguste Renoir—Parisian middle class images
Diego Rivera—Mexican images of social injustice, muralist
John Singer Sargent—upper class portraits
John Sloan—"ashcan" school of painting, urban decay
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec—the dark seedy side of the Paris nightlife
Leonardo da Vinci—the original Renaissance Man, Mona Lisa, The Last Supper
Jan Vermeer—interior images, usually of women
James McNeill Whistler—portraits and landscapes
Andrew Wyeth—haunting images of people and landscapes, many cold

Appendix C

Saving Pictures to Disk

1. Click on picture until it is full size.
2. RIGHT click on picture.
3. Click on "Save Image As..."
4. Change the "Save in" box to "3 1/2 inch Floppy (A:)" by clicking on the down arrow.
5. IMPORTANT—change the "file name" to the photographer/artist's name— followed by the title.
6. Click "Save"
7. Write down or type in Microsoft Word the title and the significance of painting/photo (what short story does it go with, which character or quote.) Tell me why you have chosen this particular painting and what it "says" to you.
8. Pat self on back.

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