

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LANGUAGE ARTS?

...It's alive and well and part of successful
literacy classrooms everywhere

DAVID BOOTH

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Where Was I When Progress Interrupted Me?

Fifty Years of Changes in Literacy Education

I have begun this book with the voice of a secondary school teacher, so that we as elementary teachers can eliminate some of our tensions over attempts to get our students ready for high school. We can then move ahead in our discussions of best practices, knowing that teachers like Rich Macpherson and his colleagues believe in our literacy programs, that our philosophy of the best education for all children holds true for teachers at every level.

In this first Today's Classroom contribution, Rich Macpherson puts the technology-supported pedagogy in the context of Grade 12 English studies.

TODAY'S CLASSROOM

The Paperless World in a Grade 12 Class

By Rich Macpherson

As a high-school English teacher who has been teaching for twenty years, I have seen the role of technology in the classroom change from the initial introduction of word processing to the world of Web 2.0, online learning systems, interactive multimedia lessons, and creative multimedia projects. The change has not been smooth, nor is it one that has taken place in every classroom. Issues of equity and accessibility of resources and training continue to present challenges. I believe, however, that we are witnessing a metamorphosis in the way we deliver curriculum and in the way students represent their understanding of the skills and content the curriculum requires. These are exciting times, and although there are perils and pitfalls in any new approach to communication, we are unlikely to have any option other than to embrace change and take advantage of these digital tools.

Technology-supported pedagogy

I have a dual role in my school: I am an English teacher, but I also have two periods a year as a literacy teacher. In the latter role I am expected

to offer support to teachers who are looking to make more use of explicit reading and writing strategies in their instruction. I focus on the use of digital strategies as a way of engaging students in learning and providing an entry point for explicit literacy instruction. In a sense, I try to “infiltrate” the classroom through technology: through the use of Web 2.0 learning platforms, interactive technology for lesson design, and technology to provide differentiation as students design and develop alternative responses to traditional texts.

Web 2.0 tools, including blogs, wikis, and Moodles, provide staff and students with the opportunity to share ownership of content. Web 2.0 is the online world that many of our students now inhabit; the world of Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and instant messaging is one in which students communicate and construct almost intuitively. Certainly, there are significant concerns over the state of privacy and personal security in this brave new world. While most students need little help in negotiating the mechanics of communication in Web 2.0 (unlike their parents and teachers), most need significant support to understand the implications of their participation in these online communities.

Establishing group norms for online work

When I have students work in small groups to construct a wiki or participate in blogs, one of my primary roles is to ensure that they create, post, and adhere to group norms that address everything from copyright issues and plagiarism to the norms for communication and debate and, above all, a respect for privacy. Students might, for example, develop a wiki in response to a theme that has been assigned as we study one of Shakespeare’s plays or participate in a blog based on the selection of novel choices in a book club. In each case, they are responsible for acknowledging and “rating,” or determining the helpfulness of, any secondary references they make according to criteria established as a class; they must also cite primary and secondary sources appropriately. When they move on to a performance task (a small-group presentation, a seminar, an oral report, a podcast, hypertext, or an essay), they are required to cite each other in their response.

While the Web 2.0 tools serve as a “carrot,” they also change the way students think and communicate. The challenge for the teacher is to awaken the students’ understanding of ownership and responsibility for the ideas and thoughts they share in this online world.

Transformative technology: The Moodle

Web 2.0 tools also provide teachers with a valuable opportunity to create and gain access to Online Professional Learning Communities (OPLCs). In my department we make use of the Moodle, the learning platform endorsed and supported by our board of education. The Moodle is essentially a customized webpage which allows teachers to work collaboratively on the design of courses, and the collection and creation of assignments and resources; it also provides opportunities to link video, blogs, electronic forums, wikis, interactive lessons, quizzes, and tests as well as RSS feeds. In three years we have gone from a department where the Department Binder was the primary tool for collecting teaching materials and curriculum supports to a department

where course Moodles represent both our shared professional efforts and ongoing collaboration. The Moodle is a dual platform: there is a teacher version and a student version, so teachers can make use of all the Moodle features for the students in their classes while hiding features that are teacher specific. The Moodle offers teachers the flexibility to

- plan, share, and publish common assessment tools
- create, gather, and publish standard exemplars
- embed annotated responses and exemplars into online response tasks
- engage in and reflect on moderated marking tasks
- design and post formative tests (e.g., novels, plays, language skills, sample literacy tests)
- access student work for ongoing assessment and evaluation tasks (digital student portfolios)
- view, mark, and grade student assignments which are uploaded through the Moodle to Turnitin.com
- provide students with opportunities for reflection and help teachers in designing individualized learning plans (metacognition)

Without question, in my career the implementation of the Moodle in my department has been the single most transformative use of technology to support teacher instruction.

Interactive technology

For me, the second significant link between explicit literacy instruction and technology has been the use of interactive technology in lesson design and delivery. In particular, the use of interactive whiteboard tools, mind-mapping software, and interactive web applications has freed the lesson from the chalkboard and overhead. The gradual spread of SMART technology in our school, including SMART Boards (interactive whiteboards), AirLiners (Bluetooth slates), and Document Cameras has helped encourage teachers to explore the use of Notebook and SMART Ideas software. These tools have obvious teacher applications in that they allow the design of interactive lessons that help to engage and hook students in the lesson, and free the teacher from the chalkboard or the overhead projector. These software applications also allow students to design presentations that make use of hyperlinks and embedded sound, video, and flash files. In my role as a literacy teacher, I have had particular success working with students in classes that focus on effective strategies for designing engaging presentations. Although these software applications work best with interactive whiteboards, they can be used in effective ways with an LCD projector. These tools are invaluable in terms of engaging students in explicit literacy instruction that provides them with interactive and kinesthetic opportunities for learning.

Digital tools for differentiated responses

The final link between technology and literacy in my classroom has been the use of digital tools to provide students with opportunities for differentiated responses (videos, graphic texts, podcasts, radio plays,

and animation) to traditional texts (plays, poems, novels, essays, and stories). For me, the key is to use the creative response as a way of engaging students in the text and providing a focus for an inquiry approach to the text. In a Grade 10 Applied English class, students developed a radio play version of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, using the movie script as their main text and the features of GarageBand (Mac) and Audacity (Windows) to include appropriate sound effects and music. They presented an oral explanation of the rationale behind their decisions and compiled producers' notes which formed the basis for their explanation. In Grades 11 and 12 classes, we have explored Shakespeare by utilizing Comic Life to design graphic novel versions of specific acts and Photo Story 3 (a wonderful free Windows download) to turn these graphic texts into photostories with music and voice-overs. In developing these projects, students need to identify the ten most significant quotations from their act, and create a written explanation or present an oral explanation of how these ten passages shape the events captured in their creative response. A close analysis of media techniques, such as storyboarding, the use of color, camera angles and distances, font selections, juxtaposition of images and text as well as the selection of music and the emotive content of voice-overs is also part of the explanation. Close reading of the highest order, this task requires that students be fully engaged in the text and with one another.

Opportunities for engagement

One of the wonderful things about teaching is that teachers learn from our students just as they learn from us. This past year students in my Grade 12 Academic English class asked for more latitude in the creation of their one-minute *Hamlet*. One group used the Nintendo Wii game system to design *Hamlet* avatar figures and appropriate backgrounds; they captured the entire act using "screenshots" before turning to Comic Life and Photo Story 3. Another group used the animation program Pivot to design and execute a stick-figure animation version of Act V. In each case, the freedom of response was encouraged by the flexibility of the technology and the critical thinking and inquiry questions at the heart of the activity. (What are the ten lines that shape this act? How, or why, do these lines shape the act?)

In the end, I don't think we should look at Joan Hughes's stages of technology-supported pedagogy (technology as replacement, amplification, and transformation) as a hierarchy or assume that every activity should involve technology, especially in cognitively transforming ways. I think the value in technology-supported pedagogy is twofold: (1) it has the potential to engage both students and staff in collaborative activities, and (2) it provides the opportunity for students to express an authentic voice in new and engaging ways. Ultimately, its value lies in engagement, while our responsibility as teachers using technology lies in our ability to ensure that our students use it in ways that are critically reflective.

Rich's classroom is a long way from my own time as a secondary student, or from my own earlier practice as a seventh and eighth grade teacher. Yet I can find commonalities — practices, teacher–learner dynamics, even similar resources. In a sense, the medium is the message that the students encounter when they are inside his structures; the engagement begins when they walk in the door and recognize their own modalities of learning. Rich's expectations are high, his standards, rigorous, much of the literature content, traditional. But the learning environment is different, as it should be if we are committed to preparing our young people for an unknown literacy future.

So, What Have We Learned?

1986 — *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn*
by Gordon Wells

What have we learned about building literacy competence in our students over more than fifty years? Who have been our mentors, and what are we doing with our accrued wisdom? Here is one answer from Gordon Wells:

We are the “meaning makers” — every one of us: children, parents, and teachers. To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature — parents and teacher — the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making.

1978 — *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*
by L. S. Vygotsky

Going back a bit further to more than *eighty* years of research contributes to our understanding of children and their language abilities. Working in Russia in the early 1930s, Lev Vygotsky described the relationship between the development of thought and the development of language, which he believed are separate processes: once children discover that everything and every action has a name, their thoughts take new and more complex form. Vygotsky's theory is that teachers should be aware of the child's “zone of proximal development” and be prepared to promote new concepts when the child is ready for them.

1968 — *The Hall-Dennis Report* is published in Ontario, with 258 recommendations emphasizing child-based classrooms and de-emphasizing rote learning.

Jean Piaget related his work to Vygotsky's. He suggested that children acquire language by using it as they take part in activities they find meaningful; they learn to speak because the need to express themselves and to understand others drives them.

1973 — *The Languages of Primary School Children*
by Connie Rosen and Harold Rosen

Making natural use of language

If children are surrounded by people who provide a rich language environment, their literacy potential will continue to develop. They become active members of society through language, sharing the experiences that bind them to others. As they use language, they discover that it can represent their thoughts. They acquire the rules of how language works from inside the act of using it. As their awareness of society extends beyond the here and now, they begin to appreciate that written language conveys lasting meaning and taps the memory of the community.