

Teaching the English Language Arts With Technology: A Critical Approach

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Abstract

In order to cultivate the kind of technology literacy in our students called for by leaders in the field, it must simultaneously be cultivated in our teachers. While the literature in the field of English education demonstrates the efficacy of computer technology in writing instruction and addresses its impact on the evolving definition of literacy in the 21st century, it does not provide measured directions for how English teachers might develop technology literacy themselves or specific plans for how they might begin to critically assess the potential that technology might hold for them in enhancing instruction. This article presents a pedagogical framework encompassing the necessary critical mindset in which teachers of the English language arts can begin to conceive their own "best practices" with technology—a framework that is based upon their needs, goals, students, and classrooms, rather than the external pressure to fit random and often decontextualized technology applications into an already complex and full curriculum. To maximize technology's benefits, educators must develop a heightened, critical view of technology to determine its potential for the classroom.

Keywords : Teaching, Language Arts and Technology.

1. Introduction

Victor Hugo once said, "Nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come. Technology, specifically computer technology, is more pervasive than ever before. It has dramatically changed the face of education in the 21st century and will continue to do so, but the extent to which technological change has improved or revolutionized teaching and learning remains a topic of debate among educators. In the field of English, Barton (1993) claimed that there were two broad areas of technological focus a decade ago: "the use of computers in writing instruction and the incorporation of technology into concepts and definitions of literacy" (p. 2). As this article will show, Hawisher (1989) and Selfe and Hawisher (1991) have demonstrated the power of computer technology in writing instruction while Myers (1996), Wilhelm(2000), Gilster (1997), and others addressed the evolution of new conceptions of literacy as a result of the proliferation of computer technology. Pope and Golub (1999) provided general principals and practices for infusing technology, which serve as a good starting point for teachers and teacher educators.

Absent from the literature, however, are measured directions for how teachers might develop technology literacy themselves, as well as specific plans for how they might begin to critically assess the potential that technology holds for them in enhancing their English language arts or methods instruction. This article aims to fill this gap by providing practical strategies for English teachers and teacher educators to develop a critical approach toward and pedagogical framework for technology integration, the first step being to recognize the complexity of the enterprise.

2. Findings and Discussions

2.1 Realizing the Complexities of Technology Integration

Despite the influx of large amounts of money being spent on technology for America's schools, specifically information, computer, and Internet technology, the results of this investment continue to be uneven. Bangert-Drowns and Pyke (1999) pointed out that, although there has been a large financial investment in bringing technology to schools, there has been little commensurate investment in preparing teachers to implement it effectively. Although access to computers in schools continues to im-

prove for students, schools are spending only a small percentage of technology dollars on professional development despite the fact that teachers say they need more of it (Ansell & Park, 2003). Federal and state initiatives like the Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to use Technology,

In order to inspire the kind of media and technology literacy in our students called for by Shaw and others, we must simultaneously be cultivating it in our teachers. The reality is that technology is a complex, dynamic, and ever-changing part of our society and world today and, given this, it is important to have an informed approach towards its role within our own sphere of influence. For our purposes, this context is the English language arts classroom, with the crucial understanding that technology and media provide yet another critical layer of complexity to defining what English is and specifying its connection to the larger issue of literacy.

2.2 (Re)Considering English and Literacy in the Information Age

To define English as a discipline is not as easy as one might assume. James Moffet (1983)

encouraged a view of English that goes beyond heterogeneous content on the one hand and skills on the other to construe English as "all discourse in our native language—any verbalizing of any phenomena, whether thought, spoken, written; whether literary or non-literary" (p. 9). This resistance to pinpointing English as a narrowly defined discipline that does not allow for accommodating a larger sense of what English is has persevered.

In *What Is English* (1990), Peter Elbow provided critical reflections of his and others' experiences in the profession, elementary through college, of the 1987 English Coalition Conference, a 20-year follow up to the historic Dartmouth Conference of 1966. The goal of the 1987 conference was, in part, to see if a consensus about the teaching of English could be reached across levels of schooling in a constructive manner (Elbow, 1990, p. 5). Consistent with Moffet (1983), Elbow was struck by the diversity of answers to the question of defining English: "English is

peculiarly rich, complex, and many-faceted. More so, I think, than most other disciplines. We're a satura (satire), a mixed bag" (p.110).

Despite its multifaceted nature, participants at the conference were able to reach some consensus about the teaching of English, if not a definition itself. Conceptualized by Shirley Brice Heath, consensus focused upon the central business of English studies having three main components:

□□ Using language actively in a diversity of ways and settings—that is, not only in the classroom as exercises for teachers but in a range of social settings with various audiences, where the language makes a difference.

□□ Reflecting on language use. Turning back and self-consciously reflecting on how one has been using language—examining these processes of talking, listening, writing, and reading.

□□ Trying to ensure that this using and reflecting go on in conditions of both nourishment and challenge, that is conditions where teachers care about students themselves and what they actively learn—not just about skills or scores or grades. (Elbow, 1990, p. 18) Inspired by Heath and Berthoff (1978, 1981), the emphasis became the student, who, as an active rather than passive learner, constructs knowledge through the technology.

2.3 Considering Technology in the English Language Arts Classroom

While technology surely receives more exposure in mathematics and science, it has also affected the manner in which we approach the teaching of the English language arts in innumerable ways. Word processing has revolutionized the way we perceive, teach, and implement the writing process, especially in terms of editing, revision, and publishing, and the effects have been positive for students as well (Hawisher, 1989; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991).

This application is probably familiar to most teachers at this point. However, much of the current writing about and training for teaching with technology often finds itself mired in the "nuts and bolts" of hardware and software without consideration of whether instruction actually warrants tech-

nology use or what the most appropriate methods of integrating technologies into current teaching and learning contexts are.

The English teaching community, especially at the K-12 level, is only just beginning to wrestle with the pedagogical complexities inherent in integrating these technologies into writing, language, and literature classrooms. With no clear sense of effective technology use, teachers often ignore it altogether or resort to exposing students simply to whatever current software is most available, with little instructional support or curricular connection. As a result, a larger sense of context is often lacking—in other words, the reasons teachers should use technology and how it can be used to advance their existing curricular goals and classroom practices.

In the teaching of the English language arts, the notion of context has always been important, and research has long supported this. For example, teachers of writing continually look for potential authentic issues, situations, and audiences in order to help their students contextualize their work (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Dyson & Freedman, 1991; Elbow, 1998; Elbow & Belanoff, 1995; Graves, 1983; Hillocks, 1986; Kirby, Kirby, & Liner, 2004; Murray, 1990; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998; etc.). Contemporary pedagogical discussions regarding grammar, language, and literature also show the need for addressing context in English language arts classrooms (Andrews, 1998; Hillocks, 1986; Martinez & Roser, 1991; Moore, 1997; Pinnel & Jagger, 1991; Weaver, 1996, 1998; Wilhelm, 1995; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998; etc.).

Technology use must have a relevant context, as well, and in terms of using it to teach the English language arts, developing a critical mindset is key for teachers to implement technologies efficiently and effectively. As Kajder (2003) wrote, "Focus has to be placed on learning with the technology rather than learning from or about the technology" (p. 9). Similarly, Willis, Stephens, and Matthew (1996) advocated an approach "which places technology in the background and the models or theories of instruction in the foreground" (p. xvi). To integrate technologies in a classroom

without an understanding of context risks using

3. Conclusion

Despite the challenges that effective technology integration poses for educators, there is hope in the powerful suggestions provided by preservice teachers and those teachers who continue their professional development through opportunities like the National Writing Project and its regional and state sites across the country. As Pope and Golub (2000) asserted, it is also important for English educators to model effective practices of teaching with technology. Keifer (1991), Young (2001), and Young and Figgins (2002) emphasized the potential technology holds for teacher empowerment and school reform when addressed as a part of teacher education. Although technology alone may not be the saving grace of education, there are important ways in which we can use it to support and enhance our teaching practices in the English language arts classroom—the key to which is developing a critical perspective that informs our pedagogical approach.

To prevent the misperceptions of technology as a false prophecy or as a silver bullet reform, it is important for educators, both preservice and veteran teachers, to develop a heightened, critical view of technology and its potential applications for the classroom (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Pope, 1999; Young & Figgins, 2002). Kajder (2003) characterized this informed perspective as one of making a critical choice:

We choose the texts we want our students to enjoy and explore. We choose the challenges and exercises we want them to experience as writers. Now we need to choose the most efficient tools for our students as learners.... The computer is simply another tool, only to be chosen when it is appropriate. (p. 11)

Under the right conditions and contexts, we know that technology has the potential to change education in compelling ways (Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997). However, Selfe (1990) reminds us, "Computer support for English programs will succeed when we identify for the profession our own uniquely humanistic vision of computer technology and its ability to

support the networking of individuals" (p. 200). With an informed pedagogical framework in mind, English teachers and English educators can begin to bring focus to this vision by asking the hard questions that lead to the development of guidelines, which in turn, allow us to make the best choices for effective technology applications and create beneficial learning experiences for our students.

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