

Learning with Technology

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Left to Right, Top to Bottom, Front to Back

Imagine the following instructional experience:

First, open your books, then turn to the first page.

Good.

Now, read the first word. When you have done this, you may read the second one. Go ahead now. Good. When you have completed this task, please read the next word, then the word after that, and so on until you reach the end of the line. See how that works?

Yes. This means you may go on to the next line. Try that again.

Good.

Eventually, you will see how this thinking applies to the *entire system* of reading—when you reach the end of one page, you turn to the next, and follow along in sequence until you are finished. Left to right, top to bottom, front to back.

See? That's how it works.

Yes, that's true—it *is* different when you use dictionaries. Or the encyclopedia, that's right, but . . . Or the Web, yes, that's true, too, but . . . or sometimes a book of poems, yes, that's very good . . . but . . . well, just follow along for now, and soon you will discover the joys of reading.

About This Column

I suspect most readers of *EJ* would associate our experience of reading a book with something distinct from instruction in the use of its pages, signatures, and binding. Still, taken together, these elements may be understood to form, in effect, the “technology” of the book. Understood as a technology, the book serves as a useful example of an instrument that enables our reading and, in turn, our capacity to give shape and understanding to our experiences.

Consider for a moment the difference between how we teach the use of books and how we teach the use of other technologies, particularly computer technologies. When we say the word “book,” we may be understood to mean “reading” most of the time. However, when we say the word “technology,” the conversation often shifts away from an emphasis on our *use* of the instruments and toward one that focuses on the instruments themselves; overwhelmingly, it would appear, we mean “technology.”

The “Learning with Technology” column, which begins with this issue of *EJ*, seeks to expand the conversation about technology to include a broad range of issues that are more properly associated with the impact technology has on learning and on our teaching practices in English education. In this column, we will tend to steer clear of issues associated with learning *about* the technology we use, or that we may aspire to use, in favor of considering how learning happens differently when different technologies are employed. We will also endeavor to explore how this learning applies to different facets of our work, ranging from our work with students in classrooms, to our work with colleagues in professional contexts, to our work in the service of our own aspirations.

The First Minute

My own entry into the use of technology was unlike the experience of many of my colleagues. Though, like them, I was not attracted by professional development instruction in the use of technology *per se*, I was very interested in writing, and particularly in finding ways to bring the experiences of writers to my students. Little did I realize at the time that my interest in writing would cause me to enter another, quite foreign world, or that this entry would eventually lead me to reframe most of my thinking about learning and teaching.

I first had the opportunity to put my students online in the mid '80s at an inner city secondary school in Toronto's east Chinatown. The reason was innocent enough. I had heard of a professional writers' “online literary magazine” (Davey and Wah) a couple of years before, and, although I had already determined with its organizers that working with students was beyond the scope of their initiative, I had been searching out ways to connect writers with my students ever since. The idea of creating communities of shared interest in writing through

the use of communications technologies seemed worth pursuing.

I met a good deal of resistance to this idea at the school. My colleagues, inundated with reforms, changing student populations and varieties of English, bigger classes, more marking, and so on, weren't so much opposed to the idea as they were skeptical, even fearful, of yet another new thing to do. The computer science department was friendly but suspicious and protective of "their" jargon-encrusted equipment. And there were a *lot* of concerns about putting students online, or giving them access to phone lines for a modem, let alone the kind of high-speed Internet access many schools enjoy or seek today.

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But in the end, we struck a deal. I promised not to involve anyone else or expect that other staff members would participate. In return, my colleagues promised not to stand in my way. It seemed a fair enough compromise, and I eventually acquired a couple of old computers, a printer, a modem, and a dolly cart on which to wheel the whole package around to my classes as a kind of computer writing activity center. Eventually, my students began exchanging their writings and commentaries with interested others online and even began encountering students and teachers in other countries such as Iceland and Israel.

And that's when my real troubles began. Our written exchanges demonstrated that something different was happening online. The students interacted in ways that were a little like "talk," but also a little like "writing," and I began to see that their online interactions were quite like the very best of class discussions, only richer, deeper, and more re-

flective than most of our period-bound classes could sustain. I also saw—to my horror—that it was different students who were doing the talking. And worse, that the things they had to say to one another were things that were largely unknown to me, their teacher.

Like most teachers, I suspect, I would have said that I strive to operate a fair and just classroom, where every student has equal access to experience. You can imagine my surprise, then, when these students, the very ones I thought I knew well, appeared to me in ways I had neither known nor understood before.

That was the first minute.

The Second Minute

The realization that I had already been teaching for some ten years before seeing this hit quickly and hard. It was a numbing thought to me, and I remember the sense of panic I felt because I had no idea what to do next, except, of course, to carry on and see what else these students I thought I knew might actually have to say.

Even in the first few weeks, the material they produced was exciting to me. Their writing was stronger, their ideas were interesting, and the more interesting the ideas became, the more interested the students were in their work—the more they saw the work as their own. Not surprisingly, I was eager to share my experiences with my colleagues. However, there was the pesky problem of our deal. So, every so often, for the rest of the year, I printed up some of the online transcripts, and . . . uh . . . forgot to pick them up from the lunch table when I left the staff room.

Months later, during our year-end professional development planning meetings, a number of colleagues—from my department and others—commented on what they had read at the lunch table. They noted how they "hadn't known" that these students—*their* students—"could write like that" or "thought that way."

The following year, I finally managed to get my own writing project off the ground—an online program that linked Canadian authors with my students. Known as the Writers In Electronic Residence (WIER) program (www.wier.ca), it enabled my students to write original works and use communications technologies to send them to a computer system, where professional writers would read

the works, comment on them, and encourage discussion with the students.

Learning Colleagues

During this time at the school, many staff members became interested in the process of this work. I was permitted to locate some of my classes in the computer lab and later in a classroom equipped with technology for writing and telecommunications. It became common to see teachers in that classroom throughout the day, undertaking their own work—even while regular classes were underway—and interacting with the students, now their learning colleagues, who, like them, were actively engaged in their own, important work. Later, when more formal professional development opportunities were offered to teachers as part of the night school program, many more staff members signed up. Some of their instructors were the students who attended classes there during the day.

Clearly, there are times when change is thrust upon us. Certainly, there are myriad sources of power capable of initiating and sustaining such thrusts in education, and technology is only one. In my own career, for instance—some twenty years, so far—I have never known a time when enthusiasm for reform or reductions in educational expenditures *hasn't* increased pressures for change in education. I have participated in many programs and initiatives designed to deal with this enthusiasm, to “improve” both my practice as a classroom teacher and the systems that govern the contexts in which we all undertake our practice.

Although many, and perhaps most, of these experiences held some value, the notion that change will not reasonably occur unless its meaning is understood (see Fullan, as well as Fullan and Miles) is consistent with the experiences I hope we will explore here concerning our work and the integration of computer-based educational technologies into classroom learning and teaching contexts. The idea that technology will be embraced by teachers if it can be used “in the service of the methods they currently employ,” or in the service of things that are understood to be important will also form some of the conversations we develop in the column, as will the prospect that such an embrace may also serve to see anew the things we know well, or believe we do.

Though I have come face to face with the idea of resistance to technology in school, I no longer see

it as “resistance” as much as a response to the wrong things. I am, after all, a fellow who has learned what happens when you change the arena of discussion.

Different people talk.

The Instructional Technology Committee

Which brings me back to the topic of this column. Beginning with this issue of *EJ*, I present the prospect that meaningful change and learning may be sustained by listening to these different voices. “Learning with Technology” will explore the learning relationships that form among teachers, students, and others through their use of technology. Of course, the points of view expressed here will reflect the varied opinions and work of the column’s contributors, but the column will undertake to distinguish between issues associated with the experiences that may be sustained by technology and the technology itself.

The members of NCTE’s Instructional Technology Committee (ITC) have agreed to assist us in this task during their current term, which runs until 2002, by focusing their efforts on the development of this column. Building on the work of previous ITCs, which operated under the capable guidance and insight of founding chair, Tharon Howard, and Becky Rickly, the current committee members will lend their considerable range of interests and expertise to the conversations we aspire to develop here in *EJ*. They will serve as guest editors, offering their own writings on particular topics, as well as working with contributors who share an interest in a given area.

The members of ITC are listed at *EJ*’s Web site (www.cc.ysu.edu/tej), and I will endeavor to keep a list of their interests as current as possible there. An overview of the range of areas of current interest and expertise follows:

- Computer-assisted writing instruction, online tutoring, and online communities
- Technology and preservice language arts teacher education and training
- Multimedia literacy and the use of computers in the teaching of writing
- Online collaborations and mentorship
- Development and evaluation of Web courses
- Pedagogy of teaching writing with computers

- Use of Web-based technology to enhance teaching and professional learning
- Developing online learning communities
- Technology use in language arts
- Online writing for middle school students
- Vertical collaboration from middle school through secondary school and college
- Teacher training, technofeminism, literature and computers, and technology theory
- Web-enhanced teaching methods, gender and technology, tenure and technology, representations on the Web, nontraditional students and online communication tools
- Online feminism/activism, and technology and ethics
- Developing online communities in classrooms and among colleagues for professional development
- Developing literature and standards-based, Web-based curricula
- Online learning and teacher education
- Project-based learning

Curricular Entry, Professional Exit

As we enter the conversation about learning with technology through this column, I hope and anticipate that we will explore a number of areas of shared interest. One of these, which is central to my own experience, concerns the prospect that the technology-enabled experiences in which we find ourselves are normally undertaken by teachers as *curricular* rather than *professional* initiatives—as activities that are undertaken in the service of student learning,

rather than in the service of one's own, more explicitly professional aspirations.

It is this shift between our work and the understandings of our work that I have described here as “the second minute.” It is a shift that occurs when our curricular entry into a learning enterprise summons our professional attention, creating new understandings in ways that compel us to take a second, more informed look. I have come to see this more informed look as what Schön refers to as reflective consequence, or what I have called here a “professional exit,” to initiatives that were intended to be curricular in nature. In future columns, I propose to explore this shift, and then to continue the conversation.

On behalf of the members of our current ITC, I invite you to participate in the conversation and to consider your own contribution to the column. I will pass submissions along to the ITC colleagues who share a particular interest in the appropriate areas. Let the conversation begin!

Works Cited

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Call for 2001 Hoey Award Nominations

The NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award is given to an outstanding teacher, grades 5–8, in honor of Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of *Read* during his nearly forty-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine. The Edwin A. Hoey Award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers who instill their own love of learning in their students. The winner of the award will receive \$2,500, plus up to \$1,000 for expenses to attend the NCTE Annual Convention in November; a one-year complimentary NCTE membership; a one-year subscription to *Voices from the Middle*; and the opportunity to present at the NCTE Annual Convention. You may obtain an application form by calling NCTE Headquarters at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3612. Applications must be postmarked no later than February 9, 2001. Results will be announced in Spring 2001, and the award will be presented at the 2001 Annual Convention in Baltimore, Maryland.
