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English Teachers: We Need to Hop on the Technology Train

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"High school English teachers are often the last group to embrace technology," I said one day to a former student, who is now the coordinator of technology for a school district near Detroit.

"No, they aren't. It's the foreign language teachers who are the hardest to convince. The English teachers are the second hardest," Andrew reported.

I, too, was a total technology skeptic, but now I am diving in, and I want to invite as many English Language Arts teachers as I can to join me in an exploration of new literacies.

What They Are

The new literacies are "new skills, strategies, and dispositions required to successfully identify important questions, locate information, engage in critical evaluation, synthesize information, and communicate on the Internet" (Castek et al. 1). The new literacies are also described as almost anything digital. These skills will be necessary in order to participate successfully in that kind of world—one filled with technological advances that require us to learn much and quickly—which is encompassing us all. Students and their teachers must not only read and write; they must also view, navigate and communicate. With the amount of information now available students must become powerful critics able to decipher what is important, what is critical to their questions, what they must ignore, and then, determine what to do with the information they select. Once enough information is located and analyzed, students must be able to synthesize and communicate better and faster in this

world of increasing speed and demand.

Defining the new literacies is difficult because they are "deictic—meaning the concepts change quickly depending on time or space" (Leu). As English teachers, we are being asked to teach skills for operations that we haven't yet imagined but which will be available perhaps sooner than we realize. Armstrong and Warlick note, "Michael Cox, a chief economist for the Federal Reserve Bank, predicted to a group of students that they would have at least five jobs after they graduate, four of which haven't been invented yet."

Some Interesting Facts and Figures

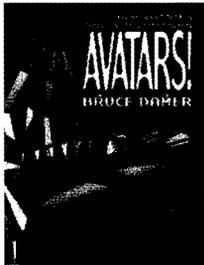
As a former high school English teacher and now as an English educator, I am aware that as a group we do tend to prefer to hold the book and the paper in our hands; that we tend to prefer to emphasize the "accepted" literature in the traditional genres of fiction, poetry, and drama; and that we prefer writing in the "accepted" genre of research papers, essays, response to literature and some creative writing. However, we should not.

The rapid emergence of the Internet is far too powerful. Between 1994 and 2002, U.S. classrooms with at least one computer went from 3 % to 92% (Leu). In fact, research shows that "the use of the internet at work and at home is one of the most powerful social revolutions taking place today" (Leu).

The December 8th issue of *Time Magazine* carried a cover story on bringing our schools out of the 20th century, and they began with a mythical tale of Rip Van Winkle returning to a world as we know it (Wallis and Steptoe). He is lost in the maze of cell phones, video games and medical advancements, but he is completely at home in a local public school. There most things seem just the same to him, though he does remark that the blackboard has changed color. Change is taking place despite



our classrooms. In the 1990's, reading online involved three basic strategies: 1) navigating text-only interfaces, 2) using keyboard-based commands to follow hyperlinks, and 3) mastering a set of programming language commands to download document files to a personal computer.



By 2004, online reading evolved to using Internet Explorer or Safari, reading different elements of Web pages like buttons, menus, go-to bars, distinguishing between internal and external hyperlinks, understanding cursor-initiated, on-screen behaviors, knowing how and when to launch and use different media within a given online space (playing a video, downloading an audio file, copying an image), and being able to trouble-shoot broken hyperlinks (Lankshear). These changes came about in fewer than ten years. The high school seniors (Class of 2004) started their schooling with paper, pencils, and books; they finished with blogs, word processors, video editors, WWW browsers, Web editors, email, spreadsheets, presentation software, instant messaging, listservs, bulletin boards (with quite a different meaning), avatars, virtual worlds, and more (Leu).

A Brief History

Literacy has a long and slowly evolving history. At first, the need to record business transactions drove the ability to read and write. We attribute the very beginning of literacy practices to the 4th century Sumerians, who as their agricultural technology improved and their population grew, found it necessary to record business transactions and tax records. The need to control the spread of religious dogma controlled the dissemination of reading materials in Medieval Europe. The church also drove a freer access to religious texts because of Martin Luther and his argument that individuals needed to read the Bible. Coupled with the invention of the printing press, reading materials became widely disseminated. But autocratic governments such as England still attempted to control printed material by confining all printing to London, York, Oxford, and Cambridge (until 1695). Printing was forbidden in the colony of Virginia until 1730 (Leu).

Today's democracies, however, encourage discussion and debate on all issues, and support public education with the responsibility to develop literate citizens who can read, write, and understand important issues. That task has become far more complex than anyone ever imagined.

With the amount of information now available students must become powerful critics able to decipher what is important, what is critical to their questions, what they must ignore, and then, determine what to do with the information they select.

In the past, students read what was handed to them. Today, we are faced with the Internet with billions of pages of information continually changing and growing (Armstrong & Warlick). In the past, texts were produced by hand, one by one; now, we have moved from mass production of texts to "post typographic" forms of text production, distribution, and reception using digital electronic media (Lankshear). In the past, the teacher was always the adult who taught skills he or she knew to a group of students who were assumed not to know those skills. Now, it is impossible for anyone to know all the skills needed to navigate the sea of information. Teachers must learn how "to orchestrate opportunities for the exchange of new literacies in the classroom" (Leu).

Just Some of the New Literacies

- E-encyclopedia books and websites that feature traditional formatted information along with animations, videos, sound buttons, virtual tours, interactive quizzes, databases, time lines, and real time reports (Castek 7).
- Online read-alouds that build listening skills,



develop background knowledge, introduce new vocabulary, and help make connections between the text and the real world (Castek 4). The ICDL offers over 800 books online in nine languages, which enable students to develop a richer understanding of a variety of cultural experiences (Castek 4).



INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S DIGITAL LIBRARY

- Student-created digital stories that begin with the student's story and can include illustrations, voice recordings, and digital pictures. Their final product can be published as a QuickTime movie and posted on the Internet.
- Students can join virtual book clubs, email discussion groups and both read, write, and post book reviews of the texts they are currently reading in class (Castek 6).
- Fan Fiction or fanfic where "devotees of TV shows, movies, or (less often) books write stories about the characters." This began in the 1960s with Star Trek and was written mainly by adults who shared and critiqued their work in small groups. Now, tens of thousands are posted on the Internet, and responses are fast and furious. Despite the content that is definitely based in pop culture, these (young) authors are demonstrating a sense of narrative style, rhetorical issues, themes, and motifs (Lankshear).
- Manga is a graphic narrative genre that could be classified as a Japanese comic. Its origin comes from humorous drawings done by Shintoist monks in the 6th century.

This became quite popular due to the growing popularity of Disney animations, cinema techniques, and Marvel and DC comics in Japan after WWII. In 2002 the largest market outside of Japan was the US where teens spent \$100 million on it. Manga practitioners "create multimedia story trailers, sound bites, and teasers to advertise their new narrative episodes as they test and develop new story lines, characters, and experiences for their characters"

(Lankshear; <http://www.howtodrawmanga.com/>).



A Few Teaching Suggestions

- Detect plagiarism with Turnitin, a program that cannot only check for plagiarism but also offers GradeMark, GradeBook, Peer Review, and Digital Portfolio. Teachers can comment on their student papers, create a grade book so that their students can view the grading system, set up a forum for peer editing, and keep a portfolio of students' work (see, <http://www.turnitin.com>).
- Teach the use of possessive nouns by creating a PowerPoint project. Each slide gives the students directions, and they comply by writing answers on their own worksheets. PowerPoint with colorful pictures and commentary is a great motivator for learning.
- Teach the correct use of homophones by creating a power point practice project. The first slide can have a creative picture, the second can define homophones, the third slide can list the rules which include explaining that if students choose the correct answer, they can go on to the next slide. If they choose the wrong word, they must re-think their answer.
- Take your students on virtual field trips and connect writing to the trip. Have students keep a journal as they "travel." Have specific questions they are to answer as they go through the site. Have students create a brochure or class newsletter that describes what they saw and learned. (For example see,

<http://www.uen.org/utahlink/tours/fieldtrips2.htm>.)

- Create your own crossword puzzles with a Crossword Puzzle Creator. You can use your vocabulary lists for practice, for review, even for assessment. Just go to EclipseCrossword.com or puzzlemaker.com.
- Create a game based on Jeopardy. Create categories and a point system in PowerPoint. Use a slide or two to explain the rules. Then have a system in place where students can select the category and the amount of points they want to risk, and they end up on a slide with an answer. They, if they can, supply the question, or you can have it set up as a multiple-choice system. You give them the answer and a couple of questions from which to choose. This can be fun, motivational, and great practice.
- Visit Education Place, a site sponsored by Houghton Mifflin which offers quizzes in sentence structure, verb use, capitalization, and punctuation; spelling games; wacky Web tales (Mad Libs); graphic organizers; Power Proofreading; and more (see <http://www.eduplace.com>).
- Help students with paragraphs. Paragraph Punch helps students write a detailed and organized paragraph. The site offers a topic and asks the student to write a topic sentence and then assists the writer in adding four or five details. This software offers advice on developing a closing sentence, and finally makes certain that writers proofread their work. Check this out at www.paragraphpunch.com.
- Visit various websites. One of my students created her own Web page called Persuasive Writing: A Writing Workshop Approach. She explains persuasive writing and the workshop approach with the four components: writing process, sharing, mini-lessons, and reading aloud. She has included excellent resources for a variety of mini-lessons such as building and refuting an argument, writing introductions and conclusions, fact v. opinion, using transitional words, and pointing to argument fallacies. It is an amazing site at <http://www.svsu.edu/~dmwillba>.
- Make/write a friend with ePALS, an Internet pen-pal program that connects teachers and students from all

over the world. Teachers set up a profile informing those who might read it and waits for a reply, or they can check the classrooms listed and contact them directly. They can communicate goals, etc. and find suitable matches. Parents are also able to join the conversation. Take a look at <http://www.epals.com>.

- Visit Inspiration.com and/or Kidspiration.com. Both are software programs designed to help writers by offering a fantastic array of graphic organizers. The designs and graphics are motivational and very organized. You can download both for thirty days and enjoy. You will definitely want to have this available in your classroom or your computer lab.
- Keep journals online. You can have your students use blogs and post them on a class website. That way they may be more motivated to write and to write more, plus you can control who can and cannot view or post to your class website. They can read each other's ideas and react to them. You, too, can read all their ideas and comment online (much easier than by hand). Try tBlog at <http://www.tblog.com>.
- Take a look at Microsoft Office Templates website. They have links called: "For Teachers" with awards, classroom management, communicating with parents and more; "For Students" with college application tools, papers, reports, and presentations, schedules and planners, and more; "For Parents" with letters to school, planning for college, and more. Go to office.microsoft.com/en-us/templates/.

Description of a New Literate: A high school student who sounds nothing like students used to when talking with one friend at a time—is this the “New Literate”?

My friends at school who also log into my talker tell me that I am much more open and expressive in cyber. I think that's because you just have to type a lot to let people know you. . . . I need to make a confession right now, I am talking to you but at the same time I am talking to this cool guy Matt who I know from school, and trying to do some homework—an essay, for which I am hunting some info on the Web—you know, throw in some jazzy pics from the Web and teachers go wild about your 'technological literacy' skills.

Big deal. If they ever saw me at my desk right now, ME, the queen of multi-tasking, they'd have no clue what was happening. (Lankshear)

Conclusion

Based on many conversations I have had with high school teachers, I know that some do use a wide variety of these "new literacies." Many use websites, interactive Internet sites, and PowerPoint. Several make use of television and music. A smaller number have students create brochures and websites, and a very few use graphic novels, digital stories, and class newsletters. The urgency I see for us to join the technology train is that in conversations that I have had with elementary teachers, I discovered that as early as second grade both teachers and students are using websites, interactive Internet sites, e-encyclopedias, PowerPoint, class newsletters, and software programs. This was a surprise to me. I was not aware that children in elementary schools were using such high technology. It is certainly a great motivator, and teachers are finding it also a great help in managing group and individual work and projects. Reading and analyzing a piece of classic literature remains an important part of our teaching, but we must also be aware of and tinker with some new ideas. English teachers are such an important part of the educational effort that perhaps we should not only be riders of the technology train, but perhaps even engineers.

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About the Author

Patricia Cavanaugh (mpc@svsu.edu) is a professor in the English Department at Saginaw Valley State University and teaches upper division composition and English Education courses. She is very interested in connecting with the area schools, working with teachers, and having SVSU students work with elementary, middle, and high school students on special projects.