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Keepin' it Real: Multiliteracies in the English Classroom

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If there was any doubt that technology has become fully interwoven with our lives, *Time Magazine* made it official last December. When they handed out the “Person of the Year” title for 2006, you – yes *you* – won (Grossman). More accurately, perhaps, we should say that the collective “you” of the world—enabled by the many technologies that now comprise what educators, businesspeople, and technologists are calling “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly) or the “read/write Web” (Richardson)—won. In a time of multiple, and multiplying technologies, it is comforting to know that people are still at the center of our digital world.

As these new technologies change how we live, work, and play, they have changed and will change learning, too. So, more important to those of us in education, especially those of us in Michigan, is the companion article that *Time* produced in conjunction with their Person of the Year announcement: “Building a New Student in Michigan” (Steptoe). In this article, Steptoe summarizes many of the new requirements that face our high school students, and one in particular that gives us pause to think:

[E]very Michigan student, whether college-bound or not, [will] be required to complete... an online course—not necessarily for credit—offered by Michigan’s web-based Virtual High School or another Internet instruction provider that meets state guidelines...

It is within this context of new standards, higher expectations, and the requirement of an online experience (Michigan Department of Education, 2006c)

that we (Troy, an English educator, and Dawn, a high school English teacher), want to discuss how what have been called new literacies (see, for instance, Lankshear & Knobel) or multiliteracies (New London Group) connect with the new Michigan content and technology standards (Michigan Department of Education, 2006a, 2006b) and provide opportunities for us as educators and for our students.

If we hope for what have been called twenty-first century learning goals (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory & Metiri Group) to happen for our students, we believe that English teachers must model how to use technologies in productive, ethical, and responsible ways. Because these new or multiliteracies may challenge our notions of what it means to be literate, it pushes at the core of what most of us believe about teaching and learning traditional literacy skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing). Multiliteracies force us to fundamentally reconsider what and how we teach.

Reconsidering our teaching methods, of course, is nothing new. Yet, we, like Anstey and Bull, think that teachers should take note of the kinds of changes that are afoot. They suggest that:

[L]iteracy pedagogy must teach students to be flexible, tolerant of different viewpoints, and able to problem solve, analyse situations, and work strategically. They must be able to identify the knowledge and resources they have and combine and recombine them to suit the particular purpose and context. Consequently, school classrooms and teachers’ pedagogy must encourage, model, and reflect these sorts of behaviours. The content and pedagogy of literacy programs must reflect the literate practices of local to global communities and equip students for change. Educators cannot hope to teach students all they need to know, as this will change constantly. But teachers can equip their students with the knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes that will enable them to meet new situations and cope with them. (18)

This type of pedagogy is difficult, and these attitudes and literacies require a different mindset about how learning works, one that demands we take our professional development into our own hands.

In a later section of this article, we will describe a project in which we collaborated and thought about such issues in terms of teaching multiliteracies by using podcasting in a speech class, working through our own personalized professional development along the way. For now, we want to consider the broad context of literacy instruction and how we have formed the beliefs that we have about teaching with new literacies.

Reimagining Technology Integration and Professional Development

Teaching with technology remains a difficult task. Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon & Byers suggest that integrating technology into one's practice involves more than just knowing how to operate a machine or surf the Web. Instead, it requires a teacher to know "what else is necessary to use a specific technology in teaching" (8). More recently, Mishra and Koehler have termed this understanding as "technological pedagogical content knowledge," or TPCK. They suggest that developing TPCK is an approach to teaching that happens over time and through practice. "Quality teaching," they suggest, "requires developing a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between technology, content, and pedagogy, and using this understanding to develop appropriate, context-specific strategies" (1029).

This type of situated, ever changing, technology-rich learning is, in our experience, challenging work. Yet, the payoffs can be immense. This form of personalized professional development involves individual inquiry and using technology tools to build a solid understanding of teaching with new media. For instance, reading and writing an education-related blog can be a personal professional development experience. Will Richardson, educational technologist and blogger, claims that "[w]ithout question, the most profound learning experience of my life has been the ongoing education I have received by keeping my own Weblog for the past 4 years" (45). To that end, the role of trial and error in playing with new technologies coupled

with rich reading, reflecting, and writing about the role of technology in the classroom can help us as teachers think through many complicated issues such as access to hardware and software, filtering, lesson planning/project design, and assessment.

At this point, you may say to us that this challenge of technology learning seems insurmountable. Here, we as adults might rely on the use of an argument about being "digital immigrants" trying to work with students who are "digital natives." As best we can tell, these terms were originally developed in order to suggest a distinction in the types of learning that adults—who have worked as writers through the technologies of pencils, typewriters, and now computers—have to keep adopting and adapting to newer literacies as technology develops. To put this in context with the way our students learn, Douglas Rushkoff argues, in *Playing the Future*, "Children are native to cyberspace and we, as adults, are immigrants." Children, having never had to work with something like a typewriter, do not know about the many stages that we, as adults, had to go through to get to the types of technology and writing we can do today. Instead, they just do it.

Moreover, Marc Prensky suggests that "today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. These differences go far further and deeper than most educators suspect or realize." For today's student, the task of thinking is not so much about remembering specific information (What is the capital of Oregon?) as it is about being able to find and evaluate that information in a timely fashion (Where do I need to go to search and figure out the capital of Oregon and how will I verify if I have the correct answer?). This contrasts with our traditional ideas of schooling that require memorization and sequential building of knowledge, the kinds of thinking that many teachers still rely on because it is the kind of thinking that has served them well for the majority of their lives, especially as students.

While we think that noting the difference between a digital native and digital immigrant is a relevant claim, we hope that we as teachers do not rely on it as an excuse. For instance, we sometimes hear ourselves and our colleagues—in face-to-face, print, and virtual

settings—claim that the digital natives with whom they work have far-outpaced them when it comes to any type of technology, from programming a VCR (or, nowadays, a DVR) to accessing the Internet on their cell phone to understanding the language of instant messaging. Natives seem to intuitively comprehend technology because they think in terms of windows, file folders, icons and other technology related structures. If we as teachers extend this argument—that students have outpaced us—then we can continue to claim, as immigrants to a digital world, that we can “never catch up” or “hope to teach” these natives. Unfortunately, we think that this argument both misrepresents the digital immigrant/native analogy and offers teachers an excuse to ignore digital technologies and, in turn, newer literacies.

We do not mean to be harsh here. As noted above, we know that learning newer technologies is difficult (and we offer some suggestions for how to do it later in this article). Yet, we also know that we are adults who, having many experiences in school, work, and life, can guide students through the use of newer technologies, even as we learn them. This is not to say that we do not have lots to learn about technology (because we do have lots to learn and always will!); it is, instead, a call for us not to abdicate our responsibilities as mentors to our students. We must teach students how to think about using technology in constructive and sophisticated ways, even if they are the ones teaching us the nuts and bolts of a particular piece of software or hardware.

Our experiences show us that collaborating with students in technology-rich projects can bring out the teacher and learner in all of us. Thus, as an example of how this might look in the classroom, we offer a brief narrative in which we describe how and why Dawn chose to do a multiliteracies project in her speech class and how we both learned more about technology, teaching, and her students in that process.

From the Front of the Classroom to the Ears of the World: Blogging and Podcasting in Speech Class

Blogging and podcasting—emerging trends in discussions related to composing and technology—remain relatively

new concepts to teachers, and even to our most tech-savvy students. While they may be able to post to MySpace and listen to iPods, students may not possess the higher level thinking and strong writing skills that both the technical and rhetorical aspects of composing demand for content-rich blogs and podcasts.

Thus, in the spring of 2006 we set out to integrate blogging and podcasting into Dawn’s high school speech class¹. In general, we believed that student perceptions of speech class have been that listening to and engaging with other speeches is not necessary. Moreover, at times, students may choose topics that are simply easy to write and talk about, instead of dealing with complicated issues that require more research and careful argument. From our own experiences as students in speech classes, we knew that it was generally perceived as a class in which standing up and talking a few times during the semester was all you really needed to do to get by. These assumptions became apparent in our study when, one day before the podcasting unit started, a student fell asleep and began snoring during another student’s speech! Further, while the traditional speech class offers elements important to student development as a speaker, we felt that technology could be integrated as extension to the work. It offers a new way of seeing what used to be a speech, delivered once, that then evaporated into the classroom air.

Our project attempted to challenge these misconceptions and problems by engaging students in responsible, ethical, and productive composing activities through blogging and podcasting. Following the “This I Believe” series from National Public Radio students crafted their own “This I Believe” essay and therefore, were able to follow the popular model and participate in an assignment that Americans from all walks of life have taken part in². Throughout the project, we tried to understand how students conceive the speech process when the audience extends its listening capabilities beyond the initial and temporal experience of hearing a talk only once. Processing of the

1 Visit <<http://reedd504.edublogs.org/>> to view the blog posts and listen to the podcasts that were generated by Dawn’s students.

2 For more details about “This I Believe” curriculum, visit <<http://thisibelieve.org/educationoutreach.html>>.

produced material therefore challenged prior understanding of giving a speech once as we began tapping into multiple mediums for receiving and producing information. In short, a speech in class goes by in a moment, whereas a podcast can be played and replayed over time. As a newer literacy practice, it changed the composing process.

During this project, Dawn molded the traditional format of standing at the podium and delivering a speech to peers in the classroom to consider other speaking possibilities. Because the particular speech we developed was modeled after the “This I Believe” series, students needed to figure out how to write within the genre, while also recording their speech with the appropriate intonation and inflections so as to insert their personality without being visibly present to their audience. At first, students did not understand why they were involved with podcasting; they thought that to fulfill the requirements of speech class, they simply needed to be comfortable in front of a crowd. Of course, as the students began to practice their speeches with collaborative groups, they did become more familiar and comfortable with one another and more able to confidently deliver their speeches. Then they began recording their speeches with a free sound editor, Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>). In moving their speeches into podcasts that were posted online, however, they began to see the possibility for a larger and more diverse audience. Yet, this goal was not actualized until the final product of their speech was shared and they received several comments on the work.

In retrospect, we wondered: How did this change the composing process? Students referred to having a “speaking personality” when they recorded and listened to their speeches as podcasts. They planned, recorded, and revised their texts and were more careful about pronunciations when it would be on permanent record, and not simply delivered once while standing in front of the class. For instance, one student, Jonathon¹, understood

1 All student names are pseudonyms and we have chosen to keep their original spelling and syntax in the quotes used here. While we could focus on the errors in this students’ writing – and at times that would be a concern for assessment – we instead want to focus on the thinking that these students have done throughout the project. We feel that the student voices in this article raise significant issues about how and why

revision in a unique way as compared podcasting to his prior experiences with writing in his reflection written at the end of the project:

The most important thing I learned was how to put my true thoughts and point of views into writing and process complete thoughts. These ‘I believe’ essays helped with shaping and creating my speech in there [sic] speeches I noticed the emotion and realism in there [sic] voice which showed that they had a genuine belief in what they were saying. After listening to there [sic] speech I decided to go out on a limb and try to match there [sic] creativeness. Once I had all my thought down on paper It took so long before I had changed everything to the way I seen fit. Hearing my voice in audacity was a wake up call I found myself rewording many parts of my essay because I didn’t feel it sounded right coming out of my mouth.

Jonathon began to understand how the tone and diction that the speaker employed affected the overall message. Because of this awareness, and the fact that he could listen to and rerecord himself, he was more willing to revise and polish his speech when it took the form of a podcast, a process that he likely would not have engaged in for a normal speech given in class. In other words, students could record and rerecord, similar to writing, yet they could also hear it and, through Audacity’s visual interface, see the inflections of their voice as well.

While we do not believe technologies, such as podcasting, replace the role of a traditional speech format, we do believe that a course can be molded to offer various types of speaking opportunities, including that of creating a podcast, to offer students a chance to extend their audience beyond the classroom and engage in more authentic experiences. Moreover, students were provided a larger audience and they took into consideration this unique opportunity for reaching that audience. Students who did not understand the reason for a larger audience or the purposes for podcasting left the project with the insight

they learned to podcast, and that these are the issues we should focus on as we develop our students’ critical thinking abilities, which was the purpose for this piece of writing Dawn asked them to do. In short, within the context of this assignment, thinking was more important than conventions.

that finding an audience can sometimes be as important to speaking as creating the speech itself. As one student, James, shares:

Doing this pod casting project had changed my outlook on public speaking. I used to think that public speaking was really just for the public around me. But this pod casting project has shown me that when your audience is limited that you will need to get a bigger one. The TV and radio are really good ways of telling your speech to the masses. But what better than to give your speech on the world wide web.

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James, who was originally skeptical about producing content for the read/write Web, had gained an appreciation for creating podcasts and

sharing his ideas. Since one of the goals of twenty-first century learning include using newer technologies to communicate to a wider audience, James exemplifies what it means to have a better understanding of how to do just that.

Immigrants and Natives Bridge the Digital Divide

Technology integration for this class was wrapped into a conversation of the manner in which technology influences speeches as well. Before we began this project, many students knew about MySpace, but not much else about the read/write Web, or Web 2.0. For instance, they were not engaged in composing, designing and producing material for the Web beyond MySpace. In fact some were surprised that people even create movies and audio to post online. This opened our eyes to the new digital divide: while several students in this class still did not have computers at home (approximately 16%), none of them were engaged in the read/write Web in what twenty-first century learning standards would describe as productive. While at times we may imagine the digital divide no longer existing, we know that it does. Moreover,

the divide now seems to be about the learning and thinking processes that go into becoming a multiliterate person, not just about hardware, software, and connectivity (although those components are essential for students to have in order to engage in these literacy processes).

Because we believed that awareness of their literacy practices and access to particular technologies would affect their experience in the project, we had to figure out how to integrate technology into a school setup that was restricted in certain ways. In general, schools try to promote technology use, but end up filtering potentially useful websites and locking down their computers in the name of safety. While we were fortunate to work with the technology staff at Dawn's school to make the project happen given our technology set-up, we did need to figure out how to listen to MP3s (as they were blocked at school) as well as what license documents needed to be completed for use of Audacity when installed on several computers. Even though we used the free and open source program recording software Audacity, it took time to get permission to have it installed on all the computers in one of our labs. While support from technology staff allowed for the project to progress, in talking with colleagues in different districts, we found that support is not always the norm.

Following the project, positive reactions were shared from colleagues and students within our school as well as from students in New York and Utah who were in classrooms of other National Writing Project teachers that we knew. In addition, our audience included students from other local high schools to students and professors from Michigan State University, as well as other friends and family across the nation. Students were grounded in ideas of how their revision process changed based on their use of multimodal writing, speaking, and listening. We did this project not just for the bells and whistles that podcasting offered, but for a meaningful composition, performance, and critical literacy experience for students. In retrospect, the podcasting project provided us—as a teacher and teacher educator—the opportunity to collaborate and examine the challenges of multiliteracy learning. By keeping the experience with technology real—that is, having an authentic purpose and audience

for a literacy event—we better understand how to engage students in relevant projects and us in personally meaningful professional development. To conclude, we now offer a few of the strategies we have learned about becoming a multiliterate teacher and providing students with the types of opportunities necessary for their academic success.

Becoming a Multiliterate Teacher

This project highlighted a number of important points about developing the technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK) that Mishra and Koehler describe. In it, we learned how to use and incorporate in a classroom one particular technology, podcasting, but kept the focus on the students' composing process within the genre of the "This I Believe" essay, not just on the technical aspects of recording and posting their work online. As we have worked together in this project, we realized that there are many aspects of learning TPCK and we share a few below. While the advice and caveats that we offer here may not be new to all readers, we add some insights that are particularly important in Michigan with the possibilities of the read/write Web as well as the new high school content standards and online experience requirement.

Personal Professional Development: Embracing the Unknown and Learning From It

Teachers today have an unprecedented opportunity to pursue personalized professional development. While much of this learning may not (and can not) come in the form of official university coursework or state certified CEUs, there are many opportunities in what has come to be known as the "Edublogosphere" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edublog>) for both you and your students to become globally aware citizens. Although many of the suggestions we offer below may not jive with your district's acceptable use policy and/or internet filtering system—we have more than once run across colleagues who cannot access any blogs or podcasts at school—there are resources that you can call upon that can help to support the argument that students should have access to particular content, including the Michigan content and technology standards. Also, there are options for rethinking acceptable use policies

to include ways for integrating the read/write Web into ethical online conduct. One place to start looking at how this can happen is with Bud Hunt's wiki, a community-built website, to see some examples of acceptable use policies and letters to parents and administrators (<http://budtheteacher.com/wiki/>).

Rest assured that you *can* learn how to incorporate evolving technologies with students in the classrooms to guide them towards their next academic steps. We started out through step-by-step learning and we continue to learn as we progress in the work. That said, we encourage you to engage in the following activities and, in turn, advocate for them with other colleagues, too:

- Read blogs and listen to podcasts, especially ones about education. Setting up an account with an RSS aggregator, which is a feed reader to access and draw in Web content, such as Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com/>) or Google Reader (<http://www.google.com/reader>) will help for blog reading. Downloading iTunes (<http://www.apple.com/itunes/>), or using the Yahoo Podcast Directory (<http://podcasts.yahoo.com/>), and looking for educational podcasts is a start for listening. There are, literally, thousands of places that you can go online to catch up on insights from real teachers in real classrooms, as well as from professors, consultants, and other educational pundits. Here are a few of our favorites:
 - Paul Allison (<http://elgg.educationbridges.net/paulallison/weblog/>)
 - Anne Davis (<http://anne.teachesme.com/>)
 - Clarence Fisher (<http://remoteaccess.typepad.com/>)
 - Bud Hunt (<http://budtheteacher.typepad.com/>)
 - Will Richardson (<http://weblogg-ed.com/>)
 - David Warlick (<http://davidwarlick.com/2cents/>)
- Once you are reading and listening, get engaged in the conversation. This is the read/write Web, after all. Begin your own Edublog (<http://edublogs.org/>) or Wikispace (<http://www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers100K>), as they are ad-free for educators. Invite your students to post items online (following your district's guidelines for posting student work) and respond to one another.

Get political. We are not talking about following a 2008 online presidential campaign through YouTube, although you could. Instead, we suggest that you talk to your administration about why and how these new technologies should be a part of your teaching and students' learning. Again, you can begin with the new high school content expectations that specifically suggest that teachers use blogs, digital stories, and other technologies in their ELA curriculum. See, for instance, CE 1.2.3: "Write, speak, and create artistic representations to express personal experience and perspective (e.g., personal narrative, poetry, imaginative writing, slam poetry, blogs, webpages)."¹ Second, you can help revise your district's technology plan and/or acceptable use policy.

- Get involved. Along with regular professional conferences, we encourage you to explore the K12Online conference (<http://k12onlineconference.org/>) this fall. Last year's event drew educators from around the world into synchronous and asynchronous events that began in October and continue today.

Focus on Literacy, Not Just Technology

Previously (and, in some cases, currently), technology learning in our schools focused on particular hardware and software and computer classes that march students through decontextualized assignments that required them to do mundane skills such as format particular kinds of documents. Not only does this practice go against what we know about contextualized multiliteracy learning, it also wastes computer lab time that could be used for more robust projects. Also, spending money on proprietary software in an era of decreasing state funding is fiscally irresponsible.

While the changes that we suggest here will take time and energy to implement, and may be difficult to adapt to at first, we believe that the long-term benefits outweigh the costs. Keeping a focus on literacy practices and not just the technology at hand requires a different mindset. The conversations that you will have to have will range from informal chats with your colleagues, to meetings

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with technology coordinators, to presentations at school board meetings. We know that in our busy lives as teachers that taking on one more activity is a lot to ask. Yet, if we as ELA teachers

do not promote the types of rich, contextual multiliteracy learning that we know will keep it real for students, then we will not get the types of support and infrastructure that enable multimedia composing. Here are some suggestions for how to engage in these conversations.

- Technology learning is no longer about a particular piece of hardware or software. With the abundance of options in both programs and gizmos available, we need to be teaching students about literacy practices, not step-by-step instructions. This is not to say that the step-by-step components are unimportant (for instance, we do need to know how to insert a picture into a movie timeline), but that we have to focus on the process of composing digital media (why did we choose to insert *that* picture, in *this* particular space of the timeline?). We need to adopt a multiliteracies perspective that keeps the mode, audience, and purpose in mind.
- Because we are adopting this perspective, and we want to be both fiscally responsible while at the same time respecting copyright laws, we need to actively explore free and open source programs that we can use in school and at home while also looking at other modes of copyright such as Creative Commons (<http://creativecommons.org/>). Wikipedia offers links to websites of open source programs that you can use—at home or, ideally at school—that replace costly proprietary programs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_source_software). That money can then be reinvested in new hardware or, more appropriately, in professional development for your colleagues.

1 You can access the entire English Language Arts High School Content Expectations at < http://michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-38924_41644_42674---,00.html>.

Also, many Web 2.0 sites have rich and interactive applications for doing many of the tasks that traditional software could, and in some ways do it even better. For instance, Google Docs allows you to save your word processing files online and access them anywhere, while also allowing synchronous and asynchronous collaboration (<http://docs.google.com/>). To get many of the features of a photo editing program, check out Picnik (<http://www.picnik.com/>). Want to make a short movie or digital story? Check out Jumpcut (<http://www.jumpcut.com/>). This is only the tip of the iceberg; for an ever-evolving list of Web 2.0 applications, visit Go to Web 2.0 (<http://www.go2web20.net/>). To think about how to use the productively, visit Educause's "7 Things You Should Know About" page to find out how educators employ everything from blogs and wikis to YouTube and Twitter (<http://www.educause.edu/7ThingsYouShouldKnowAboutSeries/7495>).

By using these open source programs and free websites, you will be encouraging students to use programs that they can legally download and work with websites where they can access their data at school, home, and elsewhere. Many of these Web-based tools also support collaborative functions, too, and may allow your students to work with you and each other in ways that support learning beyond the walls of your classroom.

Conclusion

No matter what technologies we use, students' literacy development must remain at the center of our work, along with personalized professional development that focuses first on literacy instruction, second on technologies. What are our responsibilities and what role do developing technologies—and our understanding of them—play in our understanding of what it means to teach in the twenty-first century? We feel that this suggestion to develop a personalized professional development plan and engage in the read/write Web goes beyond what is typically considered professional development—those meetings and conferences which all teachers must engage in order to earn recertification.

Instead, we believe that in order to keep professional development real for ourselves, we need to adopt a new mindset towards technology learning, one where each of us plans our own purposeful technology-rich, literacy-centered projects. The rationale that we outline early in this article, along with the ideas from our experience in the classroom and the practical ideas we suggest here at the end should give you a place to get started. Remember, this is challenging work, but you are up to it, and by doing so you will be keeping the experience of using technology in your classroom as authentic as possible for your students.

Remember, you are the "Person of the Year" after all.

Isn't it time to join the read/write Web conversation?

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