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## Facilitating the Quest: A Case Study of Three Technologies in an EAPP Writing Classroom

As the web continues to morph, creating a more inter-linked, connected, and hybridized human experience, educators are experiencing a generational shift in terms of comfort with technology. The number of technologies becoming available to students and teachers is dizzying. Within the array of possibility, this research considers three technological applications that facilitate the teaching and learning of writing: a writing blog, a word-of-the-day forum, and a storytelling grammar/style iMovie. In this exploratory research in a single graduate-level English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP) classroom, pre- and postactivity surveys seem to suggest that students found technological tools helpful in gaining and retaining writing skills.

### Introduction

After returning from a recent trip to the Grand Canyon, a friend complained that he had seen a child playing on a smartphone steps away from the rim. He found it unimaginable that anyone would stare at a screen when one of the world's marvels was so nearby. Implicit in his frustration was the pervasive belief that today's Internet generation is unable to appreciate the world like previous generations did because of the tumultuous pace of technological advancement. Missing in his observation was the number of adults that day at the Grand Canyon, adults who were most certainly posting status updates to their Facebook feeds, tweeting their GPS coordinates, or texting photographs to friends and family. Despite our ambivalence about its encroachment on "sacred ground," technology is ubiquitous in all spheres of our lives—including the classroom.

Within this context, educators are continually bombarded with new information and technological tools. Writing instructors must

wade through a seemingly endless barrage of possibility to find tools appropriate for our unique classrooms. Among the technological questions a writing instructor might face: Should I use cloud word processing to facilitate interaction—Google Docs or Buzzword? Which blogging platform is better—Blogger, TypePad, WordPress, or SquareSpace? Should I allow students to use microblogging such as Twitter and Tumblr in class? How can I use note-taking tools such as SpringNote and EverNote? I wonder if my writing class could benefit from social networking sites such as Facebook and Edmodo...

No report could fully address all of these questions (nor could any classroom integrate all of these tools). However, this research considers technological applications through the lens of three potential tools that may facilitate the teaching and learning of writing: a blog, a word-of-the-day forum, and a grammar storytelling iMovie. This exploratory research took place in a graduate-level English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP) classroom where pre- and postactivity surveys revealed that students found these tools helpful in gaining and retaining writing skills. Before this article discusses the research itself, a literature review considers the rise of the Internet and the characteristics of today's Internet-generation students. It then considers the implications of new technologies in the classroom. The literature review concludes by defining the three tools themselves—blogs, forums, and iMovie—in terms of their classroom applicability.

## Literature Review

### *The Evolution of the Internet*

At the fundamental level, “computer tools extend the power of the ordinary mind in the same way that the power tools of the Industrial Revolution extended the power of the ordinary body” (Collins & Halverson, 2009, p. 11). For those born and educated before the widespread emergence of the Internet, the interconnectivity and availability of these online tools can be daunting. Within our lifetimes, we have seen the emergence of the web and its evolution into a two-way medium (Shank, 2008). The “second generation of the world wide web” has transitioned “from static HTML web pages to a more dynamic web ...” (*Webopedia*, as cited in Solomon & Schrum, 2010, p. 1). Today, this definition of the web seems obvious, but a decade ago, the web was a one-way street. For example, in describing early versions of online writing labs (OWLs), Hobson (1998) pointed out that they were formed “primarily of the contents of old filing cabinets and handbooks—worksheets, drill activities, guides to form” (p. xvii). Today, we can easily see the difference between the Web 1.0 of 1998 and the Web 2.0 of 2013 in technologies such as VoiceThread,

through which users can view those same static worksheets while adding video, audio comments, and questions as well as their own materials in synchronous or asynchronous discussion. This transition in technology greatly has influenced the students now appearing in our higher education classrooms, learners who have grown up in the 2.0 environment. In particular, their concepts of interconnectivity and privacy differ from those of previous generations in ways that are still unfolding.

### ***The Internet Generation***

Today's student is continually wired and much more comfortable with technology's public nature than are older adults. For many of us, this attachment to smartphones seems foreign, and at times inappropriate—how much frustration have we voiced or heard about students on laptops or smartphones during class? For better or worse, our students are accustomed to emailing, texting, checking Twitter, and updating Facebook statuses, all while simultaneously carrying out other physical daily activities (such as attending classes). As Shank (2008) points out, “They use the Internet and other networked technologies (like cell phones and Blackberries) to connect to people and information for all aspects of their lives. They cannot imagine any other way of being” (p. 253).

Despite worries about rewired minds (Richtel, 2010), this multitasking will serve the Internet generation as much of the developed world transitions from the industrial era to an information-saturated workplace. Where industrial jobs and preparation for such employment favored repetition and predictability, information-age jobs will be far less structured. Today's students will rely heavily on problem-solving skills involving “unpredictable and non-routine tasks and the ability to prioritize competing demands, using multiple, often conflicting information sources and keeping up with changing needs, all to solve complex problems with constantly changing information” (Shank, 2008, p. 246).

Within this environment of continually increasing amounts of information, the role of the classroom also is changing. Thomas and Brown (2011) describe the nebulous new classroom as follows: “The context in which learning happens, the boundaries that define it, and the students, teachers, and information within it all coexist and shape each other in a mutually reinforcing way” (p. 35).

### ***The New Classroom***

Shank (2008) points out three key ways that web technologies are transforming learning. The most obvious change has occurred in how

we search for information; students today are much more likely to jump on Google than to browse the reference shelves. Technology also has changed the playing field by placing novices in direct contact with experts. Finally, because the Internet allows anyone to build a platform, the roles of learners and instructors increasingly are becoming blurred. Shank (2008) categorizes four educational changes resulting from the proliferation of the World Wide Web: from take-it-when-it's-offered to on-demand, from rote repetition to collaborative construction of knowledge, from static facts to a never-ending barrage of information, and from authoritative content to "buyer beware" information.

As a result of these changes, learners increasingly are demanding customization of their classroom experience. As Collins and Halverson (2009) point out, many people spend decades learning material in school that they may never apply in real life. However, with this on-demand trend, "whenever you need to learn something in order to accomplish a task, you can find out what you need to know" (p. 14). Meanwhile, we are witnessing the collaborative construction of knowledge via wikis, forums, blogs, and social networking. The web challenges any centralized control of information, and students themselves can contribute to the information conversation.

Effectively harnessing the power of the Internet is a challenge faced by all teachers, but considering its classroom applications can be challenging given the sheer number of possibilities. Solomon and Schrum (2010) provide eight Cs to outline the classroom opportunities provided by web-based tools: communication, collaboration, connectedness, communities of learners, convergence, contextualization, cloud computing, and cost-free services. While cloud computing, communication, and cost-free services are rather self-explanatory, the topics of collaboration and community are of particular relevance to this research.

**Collaboration.** Earlier, this literature review discussed the transition from the industrial era to the information age. In addition to nonroutine problem-solving skills, students today will be required to collaborate extensively. Solomon and Schrum (2010) point out that one of the most important skills that students will need in the future is collaboration and "the ability to work with colleagues to produce work that has shared authorship" (p. 21).

In addition to the practical role that collaboration training will play, collaboration has been shown to enhance cognitive development (Markel, 2001). Arguably, tools such as the blog and forum used in the current research allow students to interact with peers in novel ways. The scaffolding provided by more able students and the use of

language as a means to interact via commenting and revision may facilitate “deeper information processing” (Jonassen, 1998, p. 3, as cited in Markel, 2001). Because of its cognitive and pragmatic benefits, collaboration facilitated by technology provides great benefit to the classroom.

**Community.** Another relevant way that technology can benefit the classroom is through community building. In a previous paper, we noted the ability of technologies such as Moodle and forums to build a community that allows interaction to continue outside the four walls of classroom discourse (Calvert & Szasz, 2009). Historically speaking, however, this community building results from a long-standing trend away from communities of place to communities of interest (Collins & Halverson, 2009). Collins and Halverson (2009) point out that technologies have “loosened the place-based community boundaries” (p. 11), allowing for unlikely alliances and learning communities. Teachers can facilitate content-management systems, such as Moodle, to put students’ tools, work, peers, and audience in the same location. Such convenience and accessibility contributes to a learning community, which in this context refers to “spaces that serve as electronic communities of practice where you find groups of people who have a common theme for learning and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Solomon & Schrum, 2010, p. 6). By forming these nongeographical communities of place, we allow students to engage in course material in innovative new ways, such as blogs, forums, and storytelling grammar/style iMovie, the tools that form the focus of this research.

### *A Definition of the Tools*

**Blogs.** Inside the classroom, five characteristics make blogs powerful tools (Solomon & Schrum, 2010). First, the brevity of blogs forces students to communicate their ideas concisely. Meanwhile, the instantaneous nature of blogs allows quick publishing and feedback. In addition to brevity and speed, blogs can be enhanced with visual and multimedia elements, making them more attractive to readers. With their comment features, blogs allow students to interact and become more responsive to one another. Finally, the material exists forever, allowing for permanent portfolios of student work. In the current research, blogs were used to encourage students to critically analyze academic texts as well as their own scholarly writing (see Methods).

**Forum.** As Markel (2001) points out, online discussion forums allow independent and group contributions to discussions outside the classroom. They also provide a means by which students can “present” their ideas, findings, and research to the rest of the class. Markel

further notes that the asynchronous nature of forums is one of their key benefits, requiring regular participation. Perhaps most notably, forums, “if used correctly, allow for joint construction and negotiation of knowledge, which may promote cognitive development” (Markel, 2001). Students engaged with course content in discussions engage in a more generative form of information processing (Markel, 2001), and this kind of processing may aid in the retention of vocabulary. As such, in the current research, a word-of-the-day forum was used to encourage students to learn new vocabulary, incorporating new terminology into their lexicons (see Methods).

**iMovie.** The current research project used iMovie production for a digital storytelling documentary about a troubling aspect of English grammar or style (see Methods). According to Solomon and Schrum (2010), “Digital stories derive their power from adding elements of images and design to create a story that communicates in powerful ways” (p. 104). Traditionally, students have watched videos to learn; however, the tools provided by technology now allow students to create videos of their own. Arguably, such engagement allows students to more fully understand and remember course content.

### **Methods**

This exploratory study took place in a small graduate-level EAPP course at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, a Graduate School of Middlebury College, where some international students take EAPP in fulfillment of their language requirement. The EAPP Program aims to support students’ writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills in order to help them achieve academic success at the graduate level.

The course itself, *Navigating the Process: Advanced Strategies in Rewriting*, focused on revision and editing skills, and its primary goal was to provide students with the tools necessary to produce and revise graduate-level texts. A secondary goal of the course was building students’ confidence to participate fully in other academic courses with native English speakers. There were 6 students in the course, representing five countries (China, Taiwan, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan). Arguably, the small size of the class as well as the comfortable environment facilitated an intimacy that allowed greater interaction, both inside and outside the classroom.

The course met twice a week in a small classroom with a board-room-style table in the middle. A projector screen was at the head of the room, and all of the students brought laptops or tablets with them for use during class. The projector screen allowed the class to

view collaborative documents, blogs, and the word-of-the-day forum together in order to discuss salient features and aspects. Meanwhile, students' portable devices facilitated group interaction, such as editing and peer-review activities using Google collaborative documents.

The course content focused on revision and editing skills, beginning with higher-order concerns such as cohesion and coherence and moving toward the sentence level. Week by week, we tackled topics such as cohesion and coherence, concision and simplicity, concrete subjects and action verbs, and editing for idiosyncratic grammar issues. For this particular iteration of the course, the instructor instituted three technological tools: a blog, a word-of-the-day forum, and a grammar storytelling documentary. In this exploratory teacher research, students were asked to fill out a survey at the beginning and at the end of the course regarding the use of these three technologies. Their qualitative responses highlight best practices in the use of such technologies in the classroom.

### ***Word-of-the-Day Forum***

A word-of-the-day forum was incorporated into the course Moodle. Throughout the semester, students were asked to take turns posting and commenting on a new or novel word they encountered in their academic reading. During class, the students informally presented their words and discussed their usages. With forums and wikis, there seems to exist a delicate balance between true engagement and forced busy work ... and there seems to be no set formula for ensuring that students view the activity as the former rather than the latter.

In this particular case, students quickly adopted and used this tool interactively, perhaps because of the insular and communal feel of the physical classroom environment. They began commenting on one another's posts, even using humor as they engaged. For instance, one student posted the following vocabulary example from the *Guardian*: Are China and the U.S. *tetchy* twins? He followed up by defining *tetchy* as an adjective meaning irritable or overly sensitive. When a classmate noticed that he had usurped her word-of-the-day presentation date, she wrote, "So ... I guess I'll present on another day," to which he replied, "Don't get tetchy about it!" In this single exchange, the classmates went on to exchange puns (Time flies like an arrow, but fruit flies like bananas) and discuss differences between British and American word choice. Students often inquire about ways to increase their vocabulary, and arguably, such playful use of forums could add to genuine retention—these two students probably remember *tetchy* to this day.



## ***Blog***

The course blog had four components:

1. Students noted confusing passages from their academic readings.
2. They noted why they found these passages troubling.
3. They included a page of something they were currently writing.
4. They indicated areas in their passage needing feedback.

This format provided numerous advantages. Rather than using static examples from writing textbooks, we used authentic materials that students found in their own reading, thus allowing meaningful and relevant textual analysis. Meanwhile, students were engaged in self-reflection, considering their own writing in comparison with other academic texts. The blog itself allowed for interaction at all levels, as students could comment on one another's work at any time. Finally, the blog provided a permanent recording of all course activities.

The use of the blog created an interesting dynamic in class. At the beginning of class, the instructor often would select samples from student blogs for discussion. Sporadically using examples from students' blogs created a sense of accountability and responsibility for the course content. Meanwhile, because the students had such diverse academic fields (International Policy Studies, Nonproliferation and Terrorism Studies, International Environmental Policy, and International Business), they were exposed to numerous ideas and conversations that they otherwise would not encounter.

## ***Grammar Storytelling Documentary***

In previous iterations of the course, students were asked to create grammar and style presentations in small groups of two to three. They chose topics that they found particularly difficult or troublesome (i.e., articles, phrasal verbs, cohesion). Most often, students created PowerPoint presentations of the rules and integrated pen-and-paper-based activities. In this exploratory session, students created grammar storytelling documentaries using iMovie rather than undertake the traditional presentation. They were encouraged to find a "problem": "Why do my professors tell me not to start a sentence with a conjunction?" They then incorporated examples from their own work illustrating the problem before conducting research for their 10-minute documentary film. This research could include online resources integrated into the film using screen shots as well as interviews with on-campus resources, such as professors, tutors, and other students.

Finally, the students presented their findings and their videos to the class. The documentary allowed student control and flexibility while guaranteeing relevance to their learning. Meanwhile, the teamwork allowed students to build on their own strengths and creativity.

Solomon and Schrum (2010) point out numerous positive effects of creating multimedia films, including the propensity of such projects to allow students to demonstrate their own individual talents while mastering the skills of researching, reading, writing, and speaking. Meanwhile, they build problem-solving and collaboration skills while working in groups: “With such project-based learning, students can be motivated to do their best work and be proud to share what they’ve created—a professional quality documentary” (p. 105). Perhaps most important, creating a documentary film transforms students from spectators learning and memorizing materials into active participants gathering and synthesizing information to create unique products. These benefits certainly were apparent in the student documentaries. In a single group, a more outgoing student might conduct interviews while the more tech-adept student filmed it. Each project required the unique strengths of its members to reach fruition.

### **Discussion and Lessons Learned**

Through pre- and postcourse surveys and empirical observation, several themes emerged. First, with the Internet generation, more is less when it comes to technology. In addition, because of students’ familiarity with innovative web tools, it has become essential for teachers to focus on content expectations, not the technology itself. Finally, the new learning environment requires teachers to check in more often, using an iterative form of communication and feedback.

#### ***With Technology, More Is Less***

At the beginning of the semester, students filled out a questionnaire regarding their familiarity and ease with technology. The following questions addressed this issue specifically: How comfortable are you using technology tools in class for learning purposes? What value do you see in using such tools? Students uniformly replied that they felt comfortable with technology, noting its convenience and ease of use. One student noted that exposure to technology was important for her future career, while another went so far as to say, “To be honest, I am a visual person; therefore, using such tools can facilitate my learning.”

Despite students’ assurances that they felt comfortable with technology, as the teacher of the course, I was reluctant to overwhelm them with too many computer-based tools. In the end-of-semester

survey, I learned that such worries were unjustified. Students noted that the word-of-the-day forum expanded their vocabulary, while the blog increased awareness of different writing styles, techniques, and punctuation. They appreciated the creativity of the video documentary, noting that they were able to express their thoughts and ideas more freely. “The only problem,” one student noted, “was I didn’t get a notice when other people posted to the blog. Sometimes I had to check frequently. . . . A group Facebook might be better.” Interestingly, students wanted more connection through the use of technology, not less. On a personal level, this finding resonated with me; my comfort levels and technology use differed from that of my students. What seemed to be “too much” for me was too little for them.

### ***Focus on Content Expectations, Not Technology***

Along those lines, I found that focusing on content expectations was much more important than giving technology-specific instructions. Comically, I had put together a three-page handout on how to use a blog; when I went through it with my students, the collective classroom response was a nonverbal “Yeah, yeah, we get it.” I may as well have been teaching them how to use a telephone. The students already knew how to use this technology seamlessly, and those with less familiarity welcomed the opportunity to learn by doing, another characteristic often found in the Internet generation. This willingness became even clearer with the creation of the video documentary. Students were excited to do the hands-on work of creating and editing their own films.

By focusing on technology, we risk overlooking content expectations. I noted that students with facile use of Internet tools often struggled with the content that they were to produce using those tools. As such, I developed a sample blog illustrating the four components that each entry should include. I created and entered sample word-of-the-day posts to encourage student use of the forum. I also made my own grammar documentary that students could use as a model. We watched and critiqued the film in class, a process that allowed students to conceptualize their own projects. From these student films, I now have several models to use in future iterations of the project.

### ***Check In Often and Ensure Buy-In***

Because so much of what happens online is untraceable and intangible, it is imperative that we check in with students often. Markel (2001) points out that students must perceive the forums to be of value in order to adopt the practice. Sometimes, student buy-in is apparent. For instance, it quickly became clear that students were running

with the word-of-the-day forum by their humorous interactions and postings. Their commitment to the blog was illustrated through the quality of their posts and feedback to one another online and during class. However, their responses to the process of documentary making were less tangible, making me aware that I needed to check in and ask about their progress often.

Checking in may present a greater challenge in a larger classroom. As previously noted, this course benefited from its small size and comfortable classroom environment. With a larger classroom, it may be more difficult to elicit honest feedback and encourage the kind of human connection that emerges in a smaller group. Nonetheless, some formal or informal methods of checking in, perhaps through surveys or one-on-one conversations, can help instructors direct and revise classroom technological innovations.

### **Conclusion: The New Culture of Learning for the Internet Generation**

Thomas and Brown (2011) point out three important differences between the old learning paradigm and the one emerging in our classrooms. First, the traditional, physical classroom is transforming into “learning environments in which digital media provide access to a rich source of information and play” (p. 37). Second, traditional teaching has focused on instructing students about the world, while the current paradigm focuses on encouraging student learning through engaging with the world. Finally, the teaching culture of yore concentrated on assessment and outcomes. In the new culture, “the point is to embrace what we don’t know, come up with better questions about it, and continue asking those questions in order to learn more and more, both incrementally and exponentially” (p. 38).

These three differences were ubiquitous in the current research. In participating in the forum, creating a blog, and making a documentary film, student processes were just as important, if not more important, than their products. Rather than being taught about grammar points such as run-on sentences and articles, students engaged with the real world of scholars and peers to find answers. Meanwhile, the blog and word-of-the-day forum encouraged them to embrace what they did not know (“Why is this scholar using a semicolon here?”) to construct their own learning.

In a sense, these tools embrace the concept of questing, which holds that “the world provides multiple resources and avenues for solving problems, and solutions are invented as much as they are implemented” (Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 114). Now more than ever, it seems our role as educators is to facilitate questing so that our stu-

dents may integrate knowledge from tangible experience. Our changing classrooms have become innovations that emerge, cooperatively, day by day, semester by semester, year by year.

### **Author**

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