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Beyond Facebook:

Incorporating Technology into the Composition Classroom

Introduction

During my first semester of teaching, I found the classroom computers to be a rival—I could hardly compete with Facebook as I sought to encourage brainstorming or schedule student conferences. I did, however, appreciate the computers because they allowed students to write and save their work. Since composition instructors must teach in computer labs, I decided that during Spring 2010, I would implement a new approach. Without strictly dictating how students used computers in the classroom, I would provide a new perspective on the possibilities of computer-assisted instruction.

Examples of Technology

I introduced bubbl.us on the second day of class. The students used this brainstorming and mind-mapping site to explore themes that they might choose to write on throughout the semester. In the past, students had chosen to list ideas using the computer or draw their ideas on notebook paper. Using bubbl.us allowed the visual learners to create on the computer while meeting their need for visual representation of ideas and relationships. The bubble.us creation was easy to understand, easy to save, and fun for students to experiment with. I would certainly use this site again. Even though several students chose to brainstorm in a Word

document instead, those who used bubbl.us enjoyed the process and used the classroom computers in the manner intended.

A handful of times throughout the semester, I have planned lessons that include or are based on YouTube or other viral videos. If I found enough relevant, quality material to use this technique daily, I might consider doing so. However, I find that because my students never expect to see videos in class, they appreciate the variety and engage more readily when I use a video to introduce a topic of discussion. In addition, I have their undivided attention because the bigger-than-life size of the SmartBoard and the audio demand it. I have found video to be particularly helpful when teaching rhetorical analysis because rhetorical messages include much more than the written element. My students thrive with the opportunity to see and respond to real ads, debates, and arguments. Although I have only had positive experiences while incorporating video into my lessons, I think it has the potential to be overused. Education and entertainment are not mutually exclusive, but entertainment without purpose rarely belongs in the classroom. I intend to continue using viral videos as a teaching tool, and this summer I will spend some time searching for more video clips to add to my current list.

The D2L Discussion board has proven to be a useful electronic tool, especially for peer review. Last semester, I never realized the full potential of this function, and generally only half of the class used the Discussion board to post rough drafts. So I implemented some changes to encourage peer response and accountability this semester. When assigning peer-review groups, I use the Dropbox submissions as a guide. No submission, no group. Therefore students realize that they must arrive in

class prepared for peer review. I also require students to upload their comments as a response to the original poster. With this method, I see that everyone has participated, and students have quick and easy access to their peer-reviewed papers. I prefer this type of public posting because it creates a sense of openness—any classmates may choose to read the papers as well as the comments—and gives students a small incentive to improve the quality of their work.

I also incorporated a digital element when scheduling students for conferences this semester. Previously, I passed a hardcopy sign-up sheet around the room. The first student to receive the paper had his choice of times, and the final student had few options. Additionally, this method put the responsibility on me—students regularly asked about their conference times, and, if I had lost the piece of paper, my schedule and student accountability would have been lost. During each round of conferences last semester, I also had a few no-shows. So rather than use this somewhat unfair and unreliable scheduling system again, I searched online for a better option. I found a free service available on [checkappointments.com](https://www.checkappointments.com). I set up an account within a few minutes, and I received a link to my personal page. From here, I opened dates and times for conferences, and I posted the link to D2L. Students who visited D2L regularly and saw the link sometimes signed up early. Otherwise, I directed the entire class to the link and provided five minutes of class time for scheduling. [Checkappointments.com](https://www.checkappointments.com) placed responsibility where I think it belongs—on the students—and even notified me of cancellations. As a result, no students asked me to remind them of their appointment times, and everyone (excluding a student with the flu who notified me via email) arrived and arrived on

time. I cannot imagine returning to the hardcopy version of conference sign-ups. My students and I have benefitted from the ability to make and view appointments, anytime and anywhere, as long as we have Internet access.

The final unit of Spring 2010 requires students to produce a creative essay. I am encouraging them to incorporate artistic elements and try different approaches to formatting and displaying their work. In an effort to move beyond Microsoft Word, I demonstrated the available templates in Microsoft Publisher and explained the photo editing process in Paint. I then dedicated class time to allowing students to explore different software options. Although I am no expert with any of these programs, I believe that encouragement and experimentation go a long way toward proficiency. By incorporating a lesson on alternative publishing technology, my hope is twofold: I hope that students will recognize and take advantage of technology in the classroom, and I hope that students will use this experience in their real lives. Unfamiliar software likely will require more time and effort of students as they write their final essays. However, this did not seem to deter many students. Based on an informal poll, I anticipate that $\frac{3}{4}$ of my students will produce a paper using non-Word software. I want to see the final products before I determine the value of introducing alternative software, but I enjoyed providing a new way to craft an English paper and a new way to put classroom technology to work.

By the time I deliver this paper, I will have used one last technological innovation in the classroom. Students will present their creative essays to the class during the final week of the semester. They will sign up for days using Doodle.com.

Dr. Tesdell, for whom I am interning in Introduction to Technical Communication, introduced me to this tool. Originally intended as a tool for scheduling meetings, it works well for scheduling numerous people for a few predetermined dates. In this situation, I chose to use Doodle.com over checkappointments.com because it includes a visual component (a graph demonstrating who specified which date) as well as a count of those who have signed up for a given day. Also, Doodle.com does not require that I specify times, so it provides more freedom than an appointment scheduler. I anticipate that the advantages will be similar to those of checkappointments.com. I expect that my students will find this site to be user-friendly, and they will have constant access to the necessary information, so I will not be responsible for keeping track of who presents when.

Conclusion

I would love to say that my students no longer use class time to check Facebook or email, but it wouldn't be true. The challenges of teaching in a computer lab remain, and I have largely accepted that. However, rather than considering technology to be my nemesis, I embrace the fact that technology serve a purpose and that I can demonstrate for my students how to use it wisely. I want to expand my students' horizons—both through knowledge of new tools and by holding them accountable for their work and actions. Although a work in progress, I have improved my course design between fall and spring semesters, largely due to my focus on introducing specific technology in the classroom.