Challenges of Teaching Writing with Technology

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Question: “What worries you about integrating technology into the teaching of writing?”

To begin to answer this question in this essay, I consider the assumptions about the question that opens this piece and then move on to worries by considering first issues of integrating technology followed by equity and lastly attempt to address issues of general effectiveness. Ultimately, I worry that technology will be viewed as a cure-all and that it won’t be used responsibly (and I’ve experienced and been witness to many examples both in my student career). In chapter 2 of *Focus on Distance Education Developments*, Kris Blair explains her philosophy of integrating technology into the classroom using “multimodal” assignments (assignments that incorporate modern digital technologies: audio, video, websites, etc…). Blair asserts that “the best decisions are the ones that avoid integration of technology for its own sake and consider the impact of multimodal tools on student success” (Blair 11). A simple and yet primarily important philosophy, I agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Blair that as teachers we should always be responsible with our tools, making sure to put student success first.

Assumptions

The question asks what worries me about integrating technology, but the question itself does not define what technology means or how integration might be realized. Certainly the level of integration could alter one’s response. Perception of what worry means might warrant attention, but my primary concern at the outset is the definition of the term “technology.” The question implies (I think) that the answer pertain to digital technologies, but I’m glad the question itself wasn’t framed that way because it made further consideration possible.
Arguably, technology is nothing more than a tool. Albeit the term “technology” often describes the function of complex tools, but at the core all technologies represent an element of utility. That utility is sometimes intended, sometimes discovered, sometimes created, but without it one cannot rightly consider that object a tool or a technology. In the writing classroom then when thinking of a technology, one could expand the definition to anything used in the writing classroom environment. Chairs are a kind of technology we use. So are lights, books, pens, computers, chalk boards, etc… But it doesn’t make sense to talk about all the mundane objects that pertain to every classroom or that are used in almost exactly the same way regardless of the class that’s being taught. Instead we might focus on those technologies that allow us to compose. They are many and varied, but all of them permit the creation of symbolic expression. Arguably the technologies of today, while flashier, are no more adept at representing the “real” world than previous technologies. All contribute and facilitate an approximation. In his book Writing Spaces, Jay Bolter explains that “Electronic writing may [also] be virtual, yet all previous writing technologies were virtual as well … they invited readers to participate in an abstract space of signs” (Bolter 18). So instead of thinking of digital technologies as a separate category, we might think of writing technologies as those that allow us to compose, those that allow for the creation of a symbolic representation of meaningful expression (one might insert “writing” here, but I suspect my wide definition of that term, which includes any composition that expresses meaning including videos, audio, website, etc… might be misconstrued). Complexity might vary, options for varied expression might change across modalities, but ultimately composing technologies serve a similar basic function. Thus when thinking of technology in the writing classroom I think of what’s useful for writing in all its forms. Quite a few technologies fit the bill from pencils to
pens, typewriters to word processors, web development software to digital virtual environments, all serving as tools that assist in the process of composing.

Assuredly, then it makes sense that part of what we do as writing teachers is teach our students to use such technologies effectively. Fortunately, writing classrooms are and often have been sites that have mediated, distributed, and promoted various technological literacies. In one era that involved learning to use typewrites, in another the application of quill to parchment, and today in increasing frequency, the stroke of a key on a keyboard. Writing classrooms without technology—a classroom that does not (often) deal directly with technological literacy in using a pencil, paper, or word processor—doesn’t seem to be a writing classroom. Today, I imagine technology and technological literacy as an integral part of what it means to be a writing classroom. In his book Multiliteracies for a Digital Age Stuart Selber explains that “Teachers have not always seen the development and reconfiguration of literacy technologies as their job or as the instructional domains of students in writing and communication courses” (Selber 11). I’d like to think that the way Selber explains this point here implies that many more teachers are now inclined to agree with me.

While the new technological literacies in writing classrooms might be contested, the familiar ones are often considered basic. One might predict as a result that the “new-fangled” multi-modal composing of today will be common tech in the future, as the use of pens, paper, typing, or in many classrooms word processors are today. Could today’s innovations in the writing classroom may be tomorrow’s basic writing skills? I suspect so, but if that is to occur, there are hurdles to overcome, because the writing classroom is just one site where such literacies are learned. Certainly most classes in any discipline or subject seek to help students use skills beyond the classroom, but those of the writing classroom have such (potential) utility that
the writing classroom does not become a site that introduces most often brand new knowledge, but often a place where students refine and develop existing expression skills. To imagine a comparison, writing classrooms don’t teach a new kind math, they advance one’s knowledge of arithmetic or trigonometry or calculus. And it does so, often, at varying levels that for each individual student are quite impossible to completely track. Despite that seemingly insurmountable challenge (or perhaps because of it), the writing classroom is seen as a necessary learning environment, deemed essential and primary at nearly every university. Instead of writing classrooms being a place where one of the goals is to develop such literacies, however, many have come to imagine that the place where such literacies are developed is the writing classroom. And sometimes the writing classroom is held solely responsible (as if such wide, diverse skills can be learned in a short span of time) for developing very specific skills. This variance between the writing classroom, promoting technology literacy and being the place responsible for it, might seem at first glance a small distinction, but I think it’s a crucial nuance that contributes to debate of what the purpose of such an environment is and/or should be. Regardless of one’s opinions on the necessary nature of the writing classroom environment and its purpose, though, I suspect there are few who would disagree that at least part of any writing classroom should be devoted to developing composing skills and that such skills can only be developed through the use of technology (and that inevitably entails learning to develop technological literacies [using my broad definition] in the process). So, my first response to the question posed for this essay is that the integration of technology doesn’t worry me itself. That’s part of what a writing classroom does and is and should by its very nature be.

Integration
As a writing teacher, I don’t use paper. One might assume this is because of a desire to be environmentally friendly; I, however, see this only as a positive by-product of my choice. I let my students have access to their digital devices nearly all the time (asking them to put them away only when I must require them to do so). In the first year composition courses I teach I do not require that students use sources derived from physical texts, and every submission and reply between my students and myself is either in person or conducted in a digital world (e-mail, upload services, websites, etc…).

This commitment to digital technology is a personal choice that I would not impose on others (at least not as a graduate student; though, in a position of authority I can imagine supporting initiatives that require teachers to develop their own digital literacies). I am only able to make that choice because of my personal penchants for developing my own technological literacy and the advantaged environment I have the fortune to work in. Just as a reader should teach others to read, a writer teach others to write, I believe I cannot expect students to engage with a technological literacy if I do not engage in it myself. And I believe this to be extra important in this day and age because we are witness to an unprecedented and thrilling moment in history. Many children are engaging in various technological literacies on their own, sometimes with more depth, savvy, and skill than their elder generation. When has this ever happened before?

Think of the era when books were first being printed, the 1500s. Imagine widespread availability of texts and imagine children were reading books more than their parents and that they were doing so without being taught; rather, that they were in many cases teaching themselves. The analogy isn’t perfect, even so it’s also hard to conceive of how it could have
occurred. Yet today, with digital literacy developing away from print literacy, it is in some ways happening. How many parents today turn to their children for computer help?

So when considering the level of integration of digital technology, my first question is not the level I want students to operate at but to first get a sense of the level of my students’ skill, experience, and access. Despite this common trend, students are still individuals and not a sum of existing stereotypes. Our expectations of what students can do with their existing skills needs to be reasonable and appropriate as well. In chapter 3 of *Multimodal Composition* Mickey Hess explains that “Teachers should not experiment with multimodal composing assignments in the hope of getting students to produce perfect video or audioprojects any more than they should expect students to write a perfect alphabetic essay” (Hess 29-30). A tool is a tool is a tool, and though the latest ones may seem fancier, they can’t work magic. We shouldn’t expect students to know how to compose with them. We must teach them, and we must teach ourselves. But there are significant challenges to overcome that one doesn’t encounter (often) when dealing with simpler technical tools such as pens and paper. And this brings me to my first real worry.

**Equity**

I grew up poor. For ten years of my childhood my family and I lived in an unfinished basement with no floors above it. We had one internal door, the one to my parents’ bedroom, and a curtain over the bathroom entrance. The winters were cold, and I remember vividly the day one of my shoes came apart in school—the sole separating from the top of the sneaker. I had to wear an oversized pair of ratty sneakers from the nurse to get home. As an adult I am in some ways thankful for those experiences. I would never have chosen them, but what they taught me about valuing what I have today should not be underestimated. Today I own multiple computers (a
couple I built myself), a digital projector, a stash of game systems, and advanced (and expensive) software packages. I appreciate these technologies because I remember both what it was like before most them existed, and I also remember even when they did arrive what it was like to not have them.

As a substitute teacher in Elementary and High Schools (work I did several years ago) I had the opportunity to see some of the same classrooms I was a student in from the other side, and in those classrooms I saw children who were as poor as I was, some poorer. I felt for them deeply when an assignment asked them to watch a TV show, a video on Youtube, or to make a project that required providing their own materials of any kind. Such imposition might have seemed reasonable to the teacher creating the assignment. To the majority of students it likely wasn’t a problem at all. But for some, for those who grew up as I did, even the simplest of technology and assistance was often out of reach. More than being unable to complete assignments or complete them as well as others, such ignorance of socioeconomic class and technological access can reveal a students’ poverty.

As a result of my life experience I am very careful to do my best to never incorporate technology in a way that my students might not have equal access to it. How then can I run a class so devoted to the use of digital media? Because it is appropriate for my local context. I teach all laptop sections of GSW (general studies writing) at Bowling Green State university. To attend the class I teach, students must own a laptop, and they must have access to word processor software that can convert to Microsoft Word format. Bowling Green provides a Blackboard web shell for my use, and I locate all elements of my courses there. Students have access to course documents both in and outside of the classroom. Occasionally technology breaks down and accommodations need to be made, but for the most part, I know all my students have equal
access pretty much all the time. With that knowledge in hand, I feel comfortable investing in an almost entirely digital set of materials and tools for my students to use.

My worry is, however, that many teachers (or curricula or schools in general) may make the same kinds of requests of students that I do without considering what access students have. Most teachers are not as fortunate as I am, having the opportunity to work in classrooms that are all equipped with computers and projectors, working with students who all have laptops. Not all are as fortunate to have wireless access across campus in nearly every classroom. Not all work at universities with computer labs large enough to service all students who do not own their own computers. And even for those who work in environments as advantaged as my own, those teachers may be tempted to open the flood gates of technology and try everything. I think this can be equally problematic. Students need focused, clear, precise instruction. A single central portal of access can contribute significantly to the success of a course invested in digital technologies and digital literacies. And while we have a perception of students being highly literate with some specific technologies (which I think is fair and accurate), they have not had universal training. Their technology literacies are more often utility based. Students tend to know how to do what they need to know how to do (for whatever purpose be it academic or personal). This makes it even more important to keep usage focused, to use technologies appropriate for one’s context, and to limit presentation to what’s needed and to what you can teach. For instance, assuming students in my own classes can use Blackboard on the first day without help would be a mistake. Many can, but I would be remiss in my duties if I didn’t assess student ability and check it against the tools I ask them to use. I wouldn’t ask someone who can’t read to reply to a text, someone who can’t write to construct an essay, nor would I ask someone who doesn’t understand web navigation to post to a discussion board. It’s all literacy, and we must take steps
to make sure the tools we use are consistent with the access and knowledge of our students regardless of the technology and/or tools we use.

**Effectiveness**

I read a student paper recently in which the student was presenting solutions to help her former High School raise their standard test scores so the school would be able to meet the AYP (adequate yearly progress) guidelines set down by NCLB (No Child Left Behind). One suggestion the student offered was that the teachers could use more technology and this would improve the scores. In a one-on-one conference with the student I asked her why teaching with technology would be any different than without (and in this case we were using technology to mean digital technologies, websites, videos, audio clips, etc…). She explained that there were more things you could do with technology than without, so the teaching would be better. I was intrigued by this argument because I didn’t agree with the student’s core premise.

My experience has been that incompetence knows no bounds. A poor teacher with technology is still a poor teacher. However, a good teacher with technology is not necessarily a good teacher. I’ve worked with very competent in-class classroom teachers who fumble around confusedly when trying to teach in hybrid or online classrooms for the first time. The reasons for that struggle are many and varied, but what I am certain of is that technology itself isn’t enough; being a good teacher itself isn’t enough. What is required is both a knowledge of the tools and a philosophical grounding to one’s pedagogy that is realized through the responsible use of one’s available tools. Structurally, this is no different regardless of the tool, be it a pen, a book, a computer stylus, or a website. What often is different is the level of training professionals have had in various technologies and technological environments. Some skills transfer over, others do
not. And while there is a debate about whether or not hybrid and online teaching can be as effective as classroom teaching, if we are to teach in such environments (and I think there is little question that digital technology use in the classroom is likely to increase, all opinions aside) we must spend time making the transfer, developing new strategies, and implementing new programs, course designs, and practices. As a graduate student this all seems natural to me. I have taught in a variety of environments and settings in the past several years. I expect to have a changing environment I need to adapt to, and as a teacher I hope I never ossify as I have seen so many do, getting stuck in a routine of teaching the same syllabus and same material year in and year out. I want to always be reworking my practice, relating it to my working philosophy and making sure I am acting consistently and mindfully. In some ways this drive for me is a component of my personality type, and as such I do not expect others to invest the same kind of rigor. Some, to be fair, really don’t have the time. But I think even so we must make an effort to both provide opportunities for educators to develop and encourage our teachers to invest themselves (just giving them the time to do so in many cases might be sufficient).

The era of teaching like our predecessors is ending. I will not teach as those before me (even those teachers whose memory I will always hold close to my heart). My tools are different, my classroom changed. In this new digital era, we may not even know the tools that will mediate our practices in the future. In some ways this can be unsettling. But ultimately I believe it favors innovators and punishes those who are resistant to change. As long as that change is consistent with our philosophies of education, that seems reasonable and even hopeful. Often, however, the impetus for incorporating technological literacy is not the utility and teaching potential of new technologies but rather other factors that have nothing to do with teaching. We should use multimodal assignments because they advance student knowledge of composition, and we should
teach online and in hybrid environments because of the various audiences we can reach, because of the technologies we can employ to teach in new, different, and perhaps even some better ways. Education should be driven by sound practice not dollar signs. There is, however, no denying the capitalistic impact on education and how it is currently manifesting in an increase in online classes. As my student explained in the conference I referenced above, technology is seen as an assistant, as if it makes the teacher’s job easier, as if as a result of using technology we teachers can teach more students or teach better. I don’t think this is often a result of technology, however. We teach better not because of the tools we use but because of how use them.

Having helped good classroom teachers develop an online presence, I’ve seen how challenging the process of developing technological literacies can be for teachers of the generation that preceded me not because those teachers are (necessarily) resistant but because the process forces most educators to challenge expectations they may not have ever thought they would need to grapple with again. We teachers of my generation (those born in the late 70s on, we who grew up with technology) must be cognizant how different the expectations and requirements placed upon many other teachers may deter or challenge their ability to make the necessary transition to a digital environment, because it doesn’t seem to me to be at this point about whether or not to integrate digital technology but how to do so effectively. So while my first concern is overall equity, my second is overall utility. What can we use? What can our students use? How? What are the needs of our classes and how can we meet them? And lastly, how can we each adapt our existing teaching philosophies—that may have been effective in the non-digital classroom—to function as well in this new digital environment. Such a shift can tear at people’s identities, making them feel stupid, inept, and behind. But just as we are caring with our
students, we should be caring with our teachers, helping them make the transition in effective ways.

**Conclusion**

I’m not afraid of technology nor do I find its integration vexing. I think the fear and resistance many feel has more to with fear about change and the challenge of learning something new, developing new habits and philosophies than it has to do with the actual challenges of the technologies themselves. Writing classrooms are a place where technology literacies for composing are taught. So if universities are going to teach all students to compose in the modern world, it makes sense that such practice be taken up by the writing classroom. Yet with that hopeful view, I also worry (because I’ve seen how it can go wrong), that technology will be ignored out of fear, that it will be employed for the wrong reasons, that it will be seen as way to “fix” the classroom or just a way to save money. But I don’t think the problem is technology at all. The problem is the same issue that has always been of concern in the classroom, the responsible use of tools to more effectively teach students.
Works Cited


