

No Longer a Luxury: Digital Literacy Can't Wait

Following a passionate plea for teachers to incorporate technology in more meaningful ways, the authors offer specific suggestions for teaching in-depth digital literacy skills.

Nearly a decade ago, Troy coauthored with Jeff Gabrill an article titled “Multiliteracies Meet Methods: The Case for Digital Writing in English Education” (Grabill and Hicks). In it, they argued that “writing teachers must commit to this digital rhetorical perspective on writing, or they will miss the opportunity to help their students engage effectively in the ICT [Information and Communication Technology] revolution taking place right now” (308). It was one of many calls for change at the turn of the 21st century, including Troy’s books that help teachers reconsider how to teach writing in a digital age (Hicks; National Writing Project, DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks). Countless curricular documents, blue ribbon panel reports, professional books, and conference presentations over the last decade have centered on the idea of teaching students how to be literate across multiple forms of media and in a variety of contexts.

As we contemplate teaching, learning, and literacy—in this 2013 issue of *English Journal* that raises questions of capacity and audacity—we ask ourselves, How far have we come? What have we changed? How are digital literacies *really* being taught, if at all?

We are parents. We are English teachers. We are citizens in a digital age.

And we are worried.

Why? Perhaps we can best answer that question by looking inside two schools, whose stories we have compiled from our experiences talking and working with teachers.

Access and Exodus: A Look Inside Two (not so) Fictional Schools

While the two schools that we describe below are not real, they are realistic composites based on our experiences as parents, educators, and citizens. At the risk of offending colleagues who work hard to help students succeed in all schools, we offer here an “inside portrait” that represents schools on both ends of the continuum as it involves technology integration and, to a lesser extent, explicit teaching of digital literacies.

First, we travel to Access Academy, a charter school in the suburbs of a metropolitan area. Despite many years of state budget cuts, Access Academy still impresses community members, parents, state politicians, and educators with its commitment to building the capacity of technology in the school. Every room has an interactive whiteboard. School personnel are pursuing a goal of a one-to-one device ratio, and they have achieved full Google integration, giving each student an account with free Google Apps. Within the last few years, they have upgraded bandwidth to make wireless ubiquitous and reliable. The teaching staff is vibrant and willing to use tools of technology throughout the day and across the curriculum. Students use blogs, podcasts, and digital movie-making programs, yet these digital writing tools are often brought in at the end of a unit, usually if there is “extra” time after all the normal content (and test prep) has been covered, and never in a sustained, inquiry-based manner. Despite the prevalence of computers, few teachers report that they are incorporating Google

Apps or other digital tools into writing instruction on a systematic basis.

Sitting on the other side of town (and on the other side of the digital divide) is Exodus Elementary, which faces many challenges as it incurs shrinking budgets and declining student enrollment. Wireless is unreliable, the single laptop cart is never maintained, and one LCD projector must be shared among teachers. Unlike the students at Access, where 98% have computers and Internet at home, students from Exodus come from homes where technology is limited. Most families access the Internet through the public library, which has a computer lab and an after-school program. While the teachers long to use technology in meaningful ways, they find a bitter irony in the fact that the school will finally be “upgraded” so students can prepare to take the online Common Core assessments in the fall of 2014. Frustrated by the lack of technology in their classrooms, many teachers have simply given up, focusing instead on methods that do not embed technology into literacy instruction. Still, a few teachers use the technology that they have as often as possible, and the students at Exodus are all working on creating digital portfolios for the end-of-year exhibition.

Teachers at Exodus understand that the limited technology in their students’ communities and schools puts them further at risk in today’s society, just as those at Access understand that technology is imperative in education in the 21st century. However, from our perspective, both schools raise our concern. The problem boils down to two points:

1. In the districts where technology is plentiful, and access to the Internet is reliable, teachers and students report that they are not using the technologies available to them to create and consume texts in critical, creative ways. Technology is an add-on, rather than an opportunity to develop digital literacies.
2. In the districts where technology and access are not readily available and community resources are slim, teachers need to work extremely hard to make sure that their students are given comparable, if not equitable, opportunity to engage digitally and develop their literacies.

We want—or, rather, we need—today’s students to critically consume information, to create

and share across time and space, to cocreate and collaborate to solve problems, to persevere in light of setbacks, and to maintain flexibility. Digital literacies provide opportunities for the inquiries that will develop these skills. But we must have students use technology in ways that are truly digital. We should not simply have students find an image to insert into a slide deck; they should cite the source, remix the original image, and create their own images.

Thirty years ago, when teaching writing focused on product, putting down the red pen and conferencing with students was audacious. For the last three decades we have continued the shift to writer- and process-centered classrooms, and it is good that (most) teachers now adopt a process-oriented approach in their writing instruction. But it has taken nearly two generations of teachers to get there. We know that the nature of literacy has changed in the digital age, but unfortunately, we do not have decades to catch up to this change. In other words, we cannot take three decades to put down the metaphorical “red pen” as it relates to digital literacy instruction.

Instead, we must reconceptualize the teaching of literacy (as many teachers and researchers have been imploring us to do for years), and we need to do it quickly. Some obstacles, such as the issues faced by Exodus Elementary, are beyond our control as individual teachers, and we must deal with these problems at the organizational and political levels. Yet, we know that large-scale change is more likely to occur when classroom teachers lead the charge, as is evidenced by the work of the National Writing Project. What we can do as individuals is to consider deeply what it means to have students engage in digital literacy that will serve them both in school and beyond. We can look critically at pedagogy that may be perpetuating what we’ve always done.

Several years ago Alfie Kohn challenged *English Journal* readers to consider how they may “kill students’ motivation” (16) before offering concrete ideas to support “students’ desire to learn” (19). So in the spirit of Kohn’s “How to Create Nonreaders,”

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we would like to highlight practices that will kill students' motivation to become digitally literate. We hope, then, that readers will find ways around these undesirable practices, instead making digital literacy a part of their capacity to teach English in audacious ways.

Five Practices That Destroy Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is about more than just adding technology into the teaching we already do. The following common teaching practices that we have seen in classrooms as researchers and as parents of school-age children do not help develop digital literacy and may even kill students' motivation to develop their savvy use of technology and the Internet. We must stop these practices. Immediately.

1. Counting Slides (or images, links, or any other digital component of a task)

We sometimes cringe when we hear other teachers brag that they use slide shows every day. Many of our colleagues feel that requiring students to create PowerPoint presentations meets the requirements of technology integration. These same teachers often ask their students to create slide shows in lieu of writing papers or as supplements for oral presentations. When these assignments come with quantifiable criteria, we do not see the value in them. Setting a minimum number of slides, images, transitions, links, or other digital elements in student projects does little to improve digital literacy. In much the same way that some of the most reductive writing pedagogy has created patterns (five paragraphs of five sentences each, for instance), we now see similar trends happening with slide shows, websites, digital stories, and other types of digital writing projects. Rather than focusing on content—and developing an appropriate message—the assignments focus on the most basic elements of form: the things that can be counted. Some slideshows can be marvelous with only a few slides, others can be terrible with dozens; some slideshows go on and on, but others transition beautifully among 20 or more slides in only a few minutes. If digital writers are confined to a set number of slides or required to include a certain number of links, they are unlikely to use those constraints creatively. We fear that in-

stead they will strive only to meet the minimum requirements.

2. Using a Blog without Blogging

Blogs have quickly been accepted into mainstream media, and schools have likewise embraced blogs as a way to integrate educational technology. Services such as Edublogs and Kidblogs allow students and teachers to communicate online in versatile ways, but we often see teachers confusing the act of using a blog with the act of *blogging*. As defined by prominent edubloggers such as Will Richardson and Bud Hunt, blogging is an act of “connective writing,” where individuals have “the ability to publish in a variety of media with the **intention of connecting and sharing it with others** who have an interest (or passion) in the topic” (<http://weblogged.wikispaces.com/Connective+Writing>). They use *blog* as a verb, not a noun. To *blog* is to write, to publish, and to invite comment. Unfortunately, we see teachers using blogs in ways that do not capitalize on the conversational opportunities that blogging offers. One common practice that might kill students' digital literacy is a “call and response” blog where teachers post a question and students respond to that prompt, and ignore each other. Similar to the “initiate-respond-evaluate” patterns documented in classroom research, “call and response” blogs do not foster conversation or collaboration among students. They fail to develop digital literacy in meaningful ways. Similarly, using smartphones and/or social networks to send messages from the teacher to students or using wikis to fill in a preformatted page will not engage students in substantive conversation or collaborative content development.

3. Criticizing Digitalk

It undoubtedly irks many ELA teachers to see non-standard language in students' out-of-school writing. It is further worrisome when students insert abbreviations (such as BTW), logograms (such as “gr8”), or other forms of digital language in their school writing. We have heard teachers, parents, and media criticizing “texting language,” or what Kristen has named “digitalk” (Turner, “Digitalk,” “Flipping”). However, this digital, linguistic phenomenon shows a complex understanding of language. Rather than destroying students' grammar and spelling, research has shown that digitalk

actually improves students' linguistic competence (Plester, Wood, and Joshi; Wood, Jackson, Hart, Plester, and Wilde) and that adolescents develop an understanding of audience, purpose, and voice in their digital writing communities (Turner, Abrams, Donovan, and Katic). Treating digitalk as *wrong*, rather than as an example of legitimate linguistic code-switching, will not validate the digital literacy that students bring to the classroom. In contrast, discussing students' use of digitalk may serve as an opportunity to talk about audience, purpose, and appropriate uses of language in different situations.

4. Asking (only) Questions That Can Be Answered by a Search Engine

Certainly, there are some foundational ideas that we want students to *know* so they can be productive as writers. A basic understanding of grammar, how to construct a sentence and paragraph, or where to look to develop ideas for a story or essay are important, just as addition and subtraction are in math. But if we are *only* asking students questions or assigning them tasks that can be accomplished through a simple search (and a copy/paste answer), then we are not asking them to think critically or to use digital tools in substantive ways. Writing tasks should be inquiry-based, generative, and supported over time. Developing digital literacy involves more than copying information from the screen onto 3" x 5" cards (or even into a word-processing program). Students must learn to use bibliographic tools and social bookmarking to manage information. And, by creating complex literacy tasks and helping students build and refine their ideas over time, we will also help them avoid plagiarism and shallow thinking.

5. Using "Cool" Technology to Deliver a Planned Lesson

As more digital tools are developed, we see educators use these technologies in conference presentations and classroom lessons. For example, polling tools have become common, and we regularly see teachers survey students to find out about their needs, automatically creating interactive graphs from their responses and—sadly—then continue right ahead and present the same lesson with a pre-fabricated slide deck. While we admire the use of

mobile technology to invite audience participation, and we appreciate the idea of manipulating data in an interactive graph, we despair when the audience input fails to guide the conversation. If a teacher (or presenter) delivers slides as previously planned, distributes an already printed handout, and barely addresses new audience input, little collaboration or critical thinking is actually being done. Though we use polling tools as an example here, we are concerned about incorporation of *any* "cool tool" without attention to the opportunities

to develop digital literacies that it might afford. Just because a tool is listed on some new version of Bloom's taxonomy as "collaborative" or "evaluative" doesn't mean that we are using it in ways that actually manifest collaboration or evaluation.

Building Capacity Starts with Us

English teachers are overwhelmed by initiatives, standards, and high-stakes assessments. However, the concerns we outline in this article cannot be pushed aside. Over the years, teachers of English have rallied against censorship, fought for the inclusion of diverse voices in the canon of literature, and recognized the power of out-of-school literacies. Now English teachers must embrace a new role: We must advocate for digital literacy, not just technology, in a way that reconceptualizes our discipline. We must dump the dittos, throw out the workbooks, and remix our teaching for a digital age.

For help, we can look to a variety of scholars who study new media. Henry Jenkins and his colleagues, for instance, discuss the many opportunities present in our new "participatory culture" for "affiliation" (membership in online communities) and "circulation" (shaping the flow of media through new outlets such as blogging and podcasting) (Jenkins et al. 3). Howard Rheingold, in his recent book, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online*, reminds us that we should be focused on our "intentions," our "goals and priorities" when it comes to our online lives (247). He also suggests that we reflect on our "attention" as we participate digitally. He says,

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“attention training . . . involves asking yourself, at regular intervals, whether your current activity at any moment moves you closer to your goal or serves your higher priorities” (247).

Finally, Cathy N. Davidson suggests that we “rethink how we need to be organizing our institutions—our schools, our offices—to maximize the opportunities of our digital era” (12). There are countless educators who blog, chat, tweet, text, pin, post, podcast, webcast, hangout, or otherwise engage in life online, both personally and professionally. We’d like to offer ideas for every English teacher, as a teacher of literacy, to work on an individual level to (1) develop his or her own digital literacy, (2) engage in a larger conversation about digital literacy in education, and (3) support students in developing digital literacy. Here’s how.

1. Put Yourself Out There

For more than a decade, blogging has permeated the way in which we read and write on the Web. Initially dismissed as a hodge-podge of personal opinions and possible falsehoods, many bloggers have become credible sources for a variety of topics and causes. Many edubloggers share their ideas, for free, with the world. The trick is to know both whom to read and then how to write. While it is not the purpose of this article to describe RSS feeds and aggregate readers in detail, a quick search for Web-based tools, such as Feedly (<http://www.feedly.com>) or NewsBlur (<http://www.newsblur.com/>), or smartphone tools, such as Flipboard (<http://flipboard.com/>), Pulse (<https://www.pulse.me/>), or Google Currents (<https://www.google.com/producer/currents>), will allow you to subscribe to blogs and easily view them on your computer or mobile device. Taking an hour to become familiar with one or more of these programs will pay off indefinitely as you continue to develop your digital literacy.

First, for reading, Scott McLeod recommends ten blogs, including his own, that focus broadly on issues in education, and there are so many more that we could mention specific to teaching English or writing.

- Scott McLeod, Dangerously Irrelevant: <http://www.dangerouslyirrelevant.org>
- Richard Byrne, Free Technology for Teachers: <http://www.freetech4teachers.com>
- Vicki Davis, Cool Cat Teacher Blog: <http://coolcatteacher.blogspot.com>
- Larry Ferlazzo, Websites of the Day: <http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org>
- Will Richardson: <http://willrichardson.com>
- Wesley Fryer, Moving at the Speed of Creativity: <http://www.speedofcreativity.org>
- Tina Barseghian, KQED’s Mind/Shift: <http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift>
- Stephen Sawchuk, Teacher Beat: <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat>
- Jeff Dunn and Katie Lepi, Edudemic: <http://edudemic.com>
- Shelly Sanchez Terrell, Teacher Reboot Camp: <http://shellyterrell.com>

Once you are reading blogs, then take the time to respond to them, both through the comment features on existing blogs as well as by starting your own blog. Though many are happy to remain as “lurkers” who read without contributing, blogs inherently invite conversation. Putting yourself out there and contributing to the conversation through comments is an important next step for blog readers. Eventually, you might write your own blog to extend your participation. There are numerous ways to begin blogging and, again, a quick Web search will take you to many sites that you can use to do so. Most notably, Edublogs (<http://edublogs.org/>) supports free, zero-advertisement sites for teachers.

A second way to put yourself out there is to participate in a social network for professional reasons. There are many groups on Facebook and Google+ that support educational conversations and activities, and Twitter has become a haven for hundreds of educational chats through the use of hashtags. Most of these conversations have a specific time and day when they meet each week for an IM-style exchange, and then they continue to use the hashtag throughout the rest of the week. One great place to enter a discussion is #engchat (<http://www.engchat.org/>), facilitated by Meenoo Rami and hosted each week by a different English teacher. Also, check out Jerry Blumengarten’s ever-expanding list of Twitter chats (<http://cybraryman.com/chats.html>).

One additional way to build and share knowledge is through the use of a wiki. Groups of teachers

and students are using wikis for a variety of purposes, from keeping track of their learning to publishing interactive stories. For many great examples, check out the *Examples of Educational Wikis* site in Wikispaces (<http://educationalwikis.wikispaces.com/Examples+of+educational+wikis>). In addition, Troy and his colleagues at the Chippewa River Writing Project have been building resources on a wiki since 2009 (<http://chippewariverwp.wikispaces.com/>). From teaching demonstrations to agendas for professional development workshops, there are many examples of teachers sharing their knowledge and expertise available for you to review and utilize. Similarly, Kristen and preservice teachers have been creating a wiki related to the course Media Literacy and Technology. Over several semesters they have built and shared knowledge of technology, Web 2.0 tools, and digital literacy (<http://medialiteracytech.wikispaces.com/Home>).

2. Be an Advocate

Along with putting ourselves out there in educational circles, we also need to make our voices present in wider conversations about education reform. Kristen, for instance, recently published a letter to the editor of her local paper, and Troy has spoken at school board meetings in his children's district. There are numerous other examples in our profession, such as Peter Smagorinsky's regular updates about great teachers in Georgia in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the blog campaigns of Cooperative Catalyst (<http://coopcatalyst.wordpress.com/>), or educator responses to the article on writing instruction in *The Atlantic* ("Why American Students Can't Write"; <http://www.theatlantic.com/debates/education/>). Digital literacy allows us to advocate, and we can individually add our voices to the professional and political conversation.

More importantly, we need to understand the broader trends related to corporate education reform. As a part of their well-publicized strike in the fall of 2012, Chicago teachers created a resource—"Move Chicago Schools Forward"—with an incredible (and, in many ways, incredibly sobering) list of articles related to the inequalities still evident in our schools, exacerbated by "reforms" such as the Common Core State Standards (<http://www.movechicagoschoolsforward.com/resource-guide/>). Moreover, as advocates for digital literacy, we are



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quite aware of the nefarious ways in which technology has been used to undermine teachers' autonomy. Joel Spring, in his recent book, *Education Networks: Power, Wealth, Cyberspace, and the Digital Mind*, argues that

ICT (Information Communication Technology) is making it possible to create authoritarian school systems that can serve governments by ensuring that schools become a conduit for their propaganda, enhance their ability to censor learning materials, and maintain surveillance over student work. (161)

We agree with Spring who—like many advocates for what we would call *real* education reform, such as Diane Ravitch, Jonathan Kozol, Mike Rose, and the author we adapted the format of this article from, Alfie Kohn—shows us that there are many forces at work in making sure our students receive an education. What kind of education we want them to receive needs to be an issue that we take seriously, in and outside the classroom. For more resources, visit the wiki that Troy and his colleagues Allen Webb, Robert Rozema, Jory Brass, and Linda Christensen created for their 2012 NCTE Annual

Convention presentation, "SchoolTM: Teacher Decision Making in the Era of the (For-Profit) Corporate Classroom" (<http://schooltm.wikispaces.com/>).

3. Invite Students to Take (Reasonable) Risks

In the spirit of the National Writing Project (<http://www.nwp.org>), which supports the idea that teachers must *write* to teach writing, we have suggested first that you develop your own digital literacy by participating and becoming an advocate for your profession. Now we recommend that you model your own digital activities for your students by asking them to put themselves out there and to engage

in larger conversations. Ask students to find, read, and comment on real blogs. Have them write and invite comment on their own blogs. Help them to understand the purpose behind wikis (including Wikipedia) and to build repositories of knowledge. Encourage them to find and interview experts in various subjects via social networks. We understand issues of security that concern some schools; however, building students' digital literacies involves the task of asking them to take reasonable risks and helping them navigate the benefits and pitfalls of a networked world. Neglecting to teach students these skills now may leave them vulnerable later.

Can We Increase Capacity in Audacious Ways?

We need to have the courage to take on new roles as English teachers, and we cannot take as long as we have with other changes in teaching English.

We are concerned about Exodus Elementary, and all the schools it represents, because we know that the digital divide is growing, and we know that students in areas without access to tools of technology and the Internet will struggle to participate economically and politically. We are also concerned about schools like Access Academy, where shifts in educational technology do not mean shifts in broader conceptions of literacy and what it means to teach literacy in the contemporary world. We know that instruction in these schools must be remixed and that it will take some boldness to meet that goal.

Kohn ends his 2010 article with this thought: "It takes insight and guts to catch oneself at what amounts to an exercise in pseudodemocracy. Keeping hold of power—overtly for traditionalists, perhaps more subtly for those of us who think of ourselves as enlightened progressives—is a hell of a lot easier than giving it away" (21). It is even more difficult to let go of traditional ways of being and doing when we do not totally understand the technology that makes new literacies "new." Students need—and deserve—for us to catch up quickly, to let go of the past, and to critically examine whether what we do is indeed supporting the development of their digital literacies. Digital literacy is no longer a luxury, and we simply cannot wait to build the capacity in our students and colleagues, as well as ourselves. 

LIST OF WEBSITES REFERENCED IN THIS ARTICLE

Will Richardson's Wiki: Connective Writing: <http://weblogged.wikispaces.com/Connective+Writing>

Newsblur: <http://www.newsblur.com/>

Flipboard: <http://flipboard.com/>

Pulse: <https://www.pulse.me/>

Google Currents: <https://www.google.com/producer/currents>

Edublogs: <http://edublogs.org/>

Engchat: <http://www.engchat.org/>

Educational Chats on Twitter: <http://cybraryman.com/chats.html>

Educational Wikis: <http://educationalwikis.wikispaces.com/Examples+of+educational+wikis>

Chippewa River Writing Project Wiki: <http://chippewariverwp.wikispaces.com/>

Fordham GSE Media Literacy and Technology Wiki: <http://medialiteracytech.wikispaces.com/Home>

Cooperative Catalyst: <http://coopcatalyst.wordpress.com/>

The Atlantic: "Why American Students Can't Write": <http://www.theatlantic.com/debates/education/>

Moving Chicago Schools Forward: <http://www.movechicagoschoolsforward.com/resource-guide/>

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The ReadWriteThink.org strategy guide series "Teaching with Technology" offers suggestions on reading online, blogs, podcasts, and online safety. In addition, there are guides for using programs such as Voki and Glogster in the classroom. <http://www.readwritethink.org/search/?strategy-guide-series=30098>

Harvey Daniels: 2012 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

The recipient of the 2012 CEL Exemplary Leader Award is Harvey "Smokey" Daniels, an extraordinary teacher-leader whose writing, presentations, and professional development work define a model for teaching and leadership development based on research, best practice, common sense, trust, and respect. An author, editor, and consultant, he is a professor of Education at National Louis University in Chicago, Illinois, and served as co-director of the Illinois Writing Project for 26 years. A prolific writer, he has authored or coauthored 17 books and numerous articles and essays in professional journals.

In 1989, Smokey founded a summer residential retreat, the Walloon Institute, where thousands of teachers from across the country were renewed and inspired. His commitment to exceptional teaching led him to spearhead the creation of Best Practice High School in Chicago in 1966 and the Center for City Schools, a dozen interrelated projects that supported teachers and parents in restructuring schools around Chicago and the Midwest. Smokey Daniels has initiated work that is visionary, and his impact on the profession is of lasting significance.