

Editorial: Approaching Technology in English Education from a Different Perspective

[Melanie Shoffner](#), Editor
Purdue University

I grew up on the periphery of the technology explosion. I remember the divide in high school between those students who handwrote their papers and those who printed them out on home computers; I was one of the former. Using an electric typewriter was high tech for me – imagine the fun of footnotes with that piece of equipment!

Perhaps my “ah hah” moment came about when I entered university...I taught myself how to use a computer, learning on Macs in the computer labs. My roommate had a fairly old IBM computer; we shared it for our paper writing, along with a dot-matrix printer. I learned how to use an electronic library system, with online card catalogs, e-journals, and world-wide access to information. I was amazed that I could gather resources for a paper without cracking a book; I was delighted that I could expand my address book to communicate with people via email outside the university system.

As a high school English teacher, I used PowerPoint presentations and took my students to the computer lab for Internet searches or paper writing sessions—when the school’s resources allowed. Teaching college education classes, I used PowerPoint and video hooks to enhance lectures, as well as BlackBoard, e-reserves, and listserv postings. I suppose these are rather simplistic uses of technology, but I was rather proud of my efforts and their outcome.

Now, I expect rapid Internet connections and personal email accounts from everyone I meet. When I have a question, I turn to the Internet for an answer. Even though I prefer print sources, I am turning more often to electronic sources in my academic work. A big question for me currently is whether or not to purchase a laptop, even though I have a desktop—and I am quite proud that I was able to hook it up by myself.

This excerpt from my technology autobiography was written 10 years ago while a graduate student in a course entitled Theory and Research in Education Technology. I freely admit to taking the class simply to fill my schedule; a friend had already enrolled, and she encouraged me to join her when one of my previously selected courses fell through. I did, somewhat reluctantly, since I had little interest in learning more about technology, education or otherwise.

Never underestimate the power of a good professor. Thanks to Dr. Cheryl Mason Bolick (soe.unc.edu/fac_research/faculty/bolick.php), I quickly grasped that interest in technology was not the point of learning about education technology. Interest in student learning with, by, and through technology was, however, as our assignments, readings, and discussions demonstrated. The rest of my graduate school experience felt a bit like going down Alice's rabbit hole. Although I continued to describe myself as "not really a technology person," I conducted research involving electronic communication and weblogs; I was awarded an Instructional Technology Fellowship to pursue that research; and I presented at the SITE Conference three times.

And now, here I am, a tenured associate professor, still not really a technology person—despite published articles and conference presentations that focus on technology in English education. In the past three years, I have served as the SITE English Education SIG Chair (site.aace.org/sigs/english-education-sig.htm) and worked with the National Technology Leadership Coalition (NTLC) and Microsoft's Teacher Education Initiative (www.citejournal.org/vol12/iss2/editorial/article1.cfm).

I finally got that laptop computer—along with another laptop, two desktops and an iPhone. I'm not as enamored with email as I once was, but I still spend a great deal of time communicating electronically through FaceBook, Twitter, Skype, texts, forums, and listservs. PowerPoint still plays a role in my teaching, as do weblogs, wikis, video clips, word clouds, multimedia displays, and various literacy-relevant applications.

With such a background, I understand—and have come to expect—a certain amount of pushback from my preservice teachers regarding technology in the secondary English language arts classroom. They are not opposed to using technology, per se, but they do not necessarily see why they need it to teach the English language arts. More often than not, they address technology in terms of student engagement: The students enjoy using it, so if teachers use it in the classroom, students will be engaged with the material.

It took time to realize my preservice teachers are reacting just as I had initially in graduate school, focusing too much on the technology and too little on student learning. Much like Dug in the Pixar film *Up*, they are distracted by shiny technological squirrels as they consider what it means to teach and learn English language arts (ELA). Technology, in all its forms, seems to be an addition, rather than an inherent component, of the ELA classroom. Such thinking is reinforced by their conceptions of literacy as traditional print literacy. Without an understanding of literacy as multiple, integrated social and intellectual practices for meaning making (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007, 2008; Shoffner, de Oliveira, & Angus, 2011), preservice teachers can easily dismiss technology as unnecessary to their teaching and their students' learning.

I agree with my preservice teachers that one does not *need* technology to teach ELA—learning can indeed occur with a book and a good discussion—but such a rationale is too simplistic for the complex world we inhabit today. Within the ELA classroom, students should read challenging literature, write original compositions, make persuasive arguments, develop critical thinking, hone analytical reasoning, question taken-for-granted beliefs, discuss conflicting viewpoints, and collaborate with peers. Technology figures into all of these elements, outright or in its ability to support meaningful learning—if English teachers use technology for more than simple engagement.

Take, for example, an activity as ubiquitous in the ELA classroom as vocabulary study. Rather than the memorization of definitions for regurgitation on tests, the study of vocabulary should allow students to better represent ideas, strengthen communication, and recognize the importance and complexity of language. As Harmon and Wilson (2006) reminded us, through language (and its constituent, vocabulary), “we learn and come to understand the world we live in, adopt our world views, become socialized, and develop and maintain relationships” (p. 1).

To understand and engage with the complexity of language, students should work with vocabulary in more sophisticated ways than word lists, and technology offers a means to do just that. Students can visually explore connections and associations with words, concepts, and definitions using [Lexipedia](#) or [Visuwords](#). They can support their analysis of the language in select texts using [VocabGrabber](#) or [Wordle](#). They can apply their understanding of new vocabulary through visual text creation using [Storybird](#) or [Storyboard That](#). [See [Resources](#) section at the end of this editorial for URLs.]

Meaningful learning in the ELA classroom also extends to the development of higher order thinking skills. Technology offers various ways to support that development, often through the repurposing of existing applications for more academic objectives. For example, students can use social networking sites like [Twitter](#) or [Pinterest](#) to aid in their collection, questioning, and evaluation of information. They can create, analyze, and synthesize material by developing multimedia projects that draw on multiple literacies using [Capzles](#) or [Thinglink](#). Students can collaborate with peers for any number of meaningful purposes—such as creating original texts or engaging in focused discussion—using [Kidblog](#) or [twiducate](#).

Student learning should always come first when we consider how to use technology in the ELA classroom; cool applications do not replace the need for sound pedagogy. Access to technology should also come under scrutiny; free applications available through the Web (as are all the examples noted here) are more likely to be accessible to both teachers and students.

In order to understand how and why to use technology in ELA, preservice teachers need a solid grasp of pedagogical principles as they support student learning. Simply dividing students into groups does not guarantee collaborative learning, any more than requiring students to post to a class weblog guarantees thoughtful discussion. Underpinning both activities pedagogically—assigning specific tasks, for example—provides much more support for meaningful student learning. Developing that ability—recognized as technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK; Mishra & Koeller, 2006)—requires preservice teachers to make connections between content, pedagogy, and technology in meaningful ways for specific learning outcomes.

How, then, can we support preservice teachers’ understanding of technology’s place in ELA teaching and learning? We are not required to professionally reinvent ourselves as technology experts (as I hope my experience attests). We are required, however, to believe that technology influences our content area every day, in ways pedagogical, professional, and personal. That perspective requires us to rethink our approach to technology as English teacher educators.

Implement it into our own teaching.

As teacher educators, we serve as pedagogical models for our preservice teachers. If we teach them ELA methods without once using technology, why should they do any

differently when they enter their own classrooms? By integrating a range of technologies into our classroom instruction and their assignments, preservice teachers see meaningful implementation of technology that can be altered for their teaching in the secondary ELA classroom (Nobles, Dredger, & Gerheart, 2012; Shoffner, 2007; Solvie & Kloek, 2007). We must pointedly address this implementation, however, calling attention to our pedagogical choices and considering alternate approaches.

Integrate it into our coursework.

To understand better the possibilities of technology for student learning, preservice teachers need to interact with technology as learners (Courtney & King, 2009; Hughes & Robertson, 2010; Shoffner, 2009). Discussion about the pros and cons of multimedia projects in the ELA classroom can be beneficial, certainly, but the creation of a multimedia project followed by discussion in a methods course offers a richer learning experience. The integration of technology into content and methods coursework is a key element for meaningful learning. Stand-alone technology courses encourage the view of technology as an addition to teaching and learning, a separate component that must be added to the classroom. Teacher educators can better prepare preservice teachers to integrate technology meaningfully into ELA instruction if preservice teachers see technology as a natural part of their own learning and, by extension, their future students' learning.

Invite it into our thinking.

As teacher educators, we can only implement and integrate technology meaningfully if we consider its place in our content area and our teaching. Like our preservice teachers, we should question the place of technology in ELA and, like our preservice teachers, we should be willing to learn what technology means with regard to ELA teaching and learning. We have the opportunity to engage in professional conversations (e.g., NCTE's Connected Community (ncte.connectedcommunity.org/ncte/home/), attend conferences (e.g., Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (site.aace.org/conf) and conduct research (e.g., Conference on English Education Commission on New Literacies and Technologies (www.ncte.org/cee/commissions/technology)) that will not only deepen our understanding and strengthen our teaching but contribute to the ongoing and necessary debate about the place of technology in ELA.

References

- Courtney, A. M., & King, F. B. (2009). Online dialog: A tool to support preservice teacher candidates' understanding of literacy teaching and practice. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 9*(3). Retrieved from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol9/iss3/languagearts/article1.cfm>
- Harmon, M. R., & Wilson, M. J. (2006). *Beyond grammar: Language, power, and the classroom*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hughes, J., & Robertson, L. (2010). Transforming practice: Using digital video to engage students. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 10*(1). Retrieved from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol10/iss1/languagearts/article2.cfm>

Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for teacher knowledge. *Teachers College Record, 108*(6), 1017–1054.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2007). *Adolescent literacy: A policy research brief*. Urbana, IL: Author.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2008). *The NCTE definition of 21st century literacies*. Urbana, IL: Author.

Nobles, S., Dredger, K., & Gerheart, M. D. (2012). Collaboration beyond the classroom walls: Deepening learning for students, preservice teachers, teachers, and professors. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 12*(4). Retrieved from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol12/iss4/languagearts/article1.cfm>

Shoffner, M. (2009). Personal attitudes and technology: Implications for preservice teacher reflective practice. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 36*(2), 143–161.

Shoffner, M. (2007). Preservice English teachers and technology: A consideration of weblogs for the English classroom. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 7*(4). Retrieved from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol7/iss4/languagearts/article1.cfm>

Shoffner, M., de Oliveira, L., & Angus, R. (2010). Multiliteracies in the secondary English classroom: Becoming literate in the 21st century. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 9*(3), 75–89.

Solvie, P., & Kloek, M. (2007). Using technology tools to engage students with multiple learning styles in a constructivist learning environment. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 7*(2). Retrieved from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol7/iss2/languagearts/article1.cfm>

Resources

Capzles - <http://www.capzles.com/#>

Kidblog - <http://kidblog.org/home/>

Lexipedia - <http://www.lexipedia.com/>

Pinterest - <http://pinterest.com/>

Storybird - <http://storybird.com/>

Storyboard That - <http://www.storyboardthat.com/>

Thinglink - <http://www.thinglink.com/>

Twiducate - <http://www.twiducate.com/>

Twitter - <https://twitter.com>

Visuwords - <http://www.visuwords.com/>

VocabGrabber - <http://www.visualthesaurus.com/vocabgrabber/>

Wordle - <http://www.wordle.net/>

Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education is an online journal. All text, tables, and figures in the print version of this article are exact representations of the original. However, the original article may also include video and audio files, which can be accessed on the World Wide Web at <http://www.citejournal.org>