

In Search of the Technology-Using English Teacher: A Response to Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, and Whitin

[Sara Kajder](#)
University of Louisville

Abstract

This response to “Beliefs about Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers: Beginning the Conversation” (Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005) offers a framework for considering the qualities of the technology-using English teacher.

As I read the draft beliefs statement by [Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, and Whitin \(2005\)](#) I was again reminded of the ways in which technology is seeded throughout my daily practice as a reader, a writer, a teacher, a researcher, and a colleague. Within the first few hours of that day, I had

- Read and commented on the blog postings that students in my graduate literacy course had made the night before.
- Dipped into my email to scan for student inquiries and anything flagged as urgent.
- Read several articles that were linked within this week’s NCTE update.
- Sent students an attachment of a PowerPoint presentation that I had “inked” using MS Journal on my tablet PC in response to their inquiries and comments during class the night before.
- Pulled up WikiYa.org in order to read entries, post comments, and use the materials to guide selections for a young adult literature course I am building for a later semester.
- Evaluated student digital literacy narratives by creating screencasts of my reactions and thoughts when reading their multimodal compositions.

- Listened to podcasts of literature circle discussions generated by a seventh-grade class I am researching here in the city.
- Conferenced via iTalk with a student teacher about possible lesson ideas for teaching reluctant middle school readers.
- Synched my PDA to make sure that I had the latest schedule for meetings and the accompanying documents for each.
- And designed an evaluation rubric for student electronic portfolio projects.

Technology infuses my work in dynamic and dramatic ways, most of which would not have been possible even a year ago. I require as much from my students as I do myself; multiple assignments across my methods courses are multimodal and collaborative and involve literacies with definitions that are still in flux. And I do not teach in a technology-laden facility. Like the majority of K-12 classrooms surrounding the campus, we lack classroom access. In the classes that I teach, I work with my personal tablet PC and the occasional LCD projector – when one is available through our library. We have wireless, but with only one computer for a class of 25 who teach in placements ranging from highly urban to very rural settings, access is about more than plugging in.

As a technology-using teacher educator, I looked to the beliefs statement as a document that could provide a vision for how technology is transforming our field while also providing grounding in what it means to prepare effective and engaged preservice and practicing secondary English/language arts teachers. As I could not agree more that "focusing on teaching new technologies rather than English/language arts/literacy learning is shortsighted," I read the document in two very specific ways (Swenson et al., p. 217). I closely read to see how my own teaching and courses mapped into the document, and I read to see what new openings and possibilities it presented.

Previously, I had looked to several other seminal documents through a similar lens. Specific to literacy-education, multiple researchers (Labbo & Reinking, 1999; Merkley, Schmidt, & Allen, 2002; Pope & Golub, 1999; Watts-Taffe, Gwinn, Johnson, & Horn, 2003) have advocated for methods courses in which teachers "consider how new technologies intersect with traditional instruction and whether those technologies add anything beyond what might be accomplished more efficiently and cost effectively using conventional technologies" (Labbo & Reinking, p. 483).

That said, neither the *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts* (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 1996a), the *Standards for the English/Language Arts* (NCTE, 1996b), nor the *NCTE/NCATE Program Standards: Program for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts, Grades 7-12* (NCTE, 2003) identify uses for technology beyond use of the overhead projector or film studies. Further, neither of these documents offers a definition of literacy as multimodal, situated, and centered on producing valued meanings from both print and other symbol systems (Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Up until this point in time, my guiding document had been Pope and Golub (2000), which includes guidelines for the infusion of technology into the preparation of secondary English/language arts teachers. Pope and Golub established the embeddedness of technology within English teachers' and English educators' pedagogical content knowledge, as "teaching and learning English/language arts is our goal; technology is a means by which we can reach our goal." Where the guidelines are general and do not mention specific technologies, they provide a vision that informs my courses and the current draft of the beliefs statement: the value of infusing technology in a subject-

specific context, the importance of technology as a literacy tool, the need for English/language arts educators to be models of effective technology-integrated practice, and the need for critically evaluating the value added by the instructional use of technologies within instructional lessons and activities.

The current draft of the Swenson et al. (2005) beliefs document pushes the thinking well past Pope and Golub's (2000) framework, offering glossaries of terms, addressing the ways that digital reading and writing have impacted literate practice, outlining some of the political, economic, and sociocultural influences impacting our work, and linking each big idea back to the way it informs classroom work and practice.

Whether discussing the relative merits of comparative analysis of digital and print-based texts or the importance of considering the process of composing a multimodal text, the beliefs document directly identifies a rationale, as well as a set of implications for each of the major sections. The document challenges me, as a methods professor, to consider how my classes incorporate technology, the critical lens that I challenge students to exercise, and the ways in which the wide range of access to technology outside of my classroom influences the design and work of our methods courses.

That said, as much as the draft challenged me to consider what I include in my courses and why, the most significant task was to consider who my students are – and, perhaps more importantly, who the teachers are that we are leading them to become. As much as the draft provides guidelines and suggestions for the role that technology needs to play within the literacy classroom, it implicitly offers a framework for the qualities of the teacher who puts such practice into play. In this piece, I identify those elements, hoping to add to the discussion by providing another means through which to consider the contents of the draft statements.

Strong Content Knowledge

For English teachers, content knowledge is as much about knowing strategies for applying formalist/structuralist critical theory to a Shakespeare play as it is knowing the larger political and social context of that theory, how it operates, and the implications for its selection and application, as opposed to a Marxist or even a psychoanalytical reading. Content simply has to come first. How do I lead students to close, rich engagement with literature? How can we work to communicate their understanding through powerful, effective writing? In some classrooms, we might conduct an online writing workshop using Web-conferencing, wikis, and other online tools in order to connect to a network of experts and support authentic assessment. In others, we might use weblogs to lead students into multigenre, multimedia response writing. No matter the technologies used, the core remains the same. The first order of business is to ensure meaningful, authentic connection to our curriculum.

A Critical Lens

The draft repeatedly and explicitly emphasizes a process in which teachers ask “how the technology can support and expand effective teaching and learning within the discipline, while simultaneously adjusting to the changes in content and pedagogy that technology by its very nature brings about” (Swenson et al., 2005, p. 222). Technology integration does not happen when teachers “drop” a tool into their teaching just as students walk in the door or as a mandated assessment tool/mechanism. Instead, effective technology integration occurs as teachers problematize the instructional value-added by a tool used within a specific learning event or unit. In other words, teachers critically consider

authentic instructional needs/problems alongside the unique capacities particular tools provide. As explained by Young and Bush (2004), "The power of the pedagogy must drive the technology being implemented, so that instruction, skills, content, or literacy is enhanced in some meaningful way."

Reflection

Teaching is a process of ongoing learning, reflection, and decision making. Reflective teachers review, reconstruct, and reenact both their students' performance and their own work in the classroom. This is not just a disposition or a set of strategies but a kind of analytical thinking that targets, investigates, and evaluates one's work.

Critical analysis of the unique capacities of a tool and the way those capacities map into one's instructional needs and goals is only one step of the process in becoming what these belief statements frame as a technology-using teacher. Reflective teachers closely evaluate how the uses of the technology led students to exercise new and known literacy skills, how their practice and pedagogy informed and shaped the class, and how assessments led them to see what students knew, understood, and were able to do after instruction. These teachers also are critically aware of how their instruction addresses issues of access, equity, and the many divides that play out in his classroom.

Flexibility

Early in my teaching, I felt like it was possible to keep up with new tools. I was a product of teacher education programs that either posited instructional technology into a course designed to teach me how to functionally use specific software tools (i.e., spreadsheets or Hyperstudio) or that completely ignored the necessity for English teachers to know how to teach with technology. Keeping ahead of the new tools is simply no longer possible. There is no exhaustive class or series of classes that can teach preservice teachers all of the hardware and software that would add instructional value to their practice.

Instead, we teach flexibility. It is no longer a matter of teaching students to create a MS Word document. Instead, we teach them how to think about the unique capacities of the tool (i.e., color, embedded comments) and how using that tool in the classroom allows students to accomplish something that they could not otherwise do. We cannot be software or hardware based. Instead, we need to prepare teachers to think their way through new, emergent tools, critically evaluate the potential instructional value added, and then design instructional methods and tasks that move all students' skills.

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Author Note:

Sara Kajder
University of Louisville
sara.kajder@louisville.edu

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