

VETTA VRATULIS

“THEY KNOW THAT THEY KNOW MORE THAN ME”: TEACHERS REFLECT ON TECHNOLOGY

Irene’s vision of technology has been significantly shaped by her dedication for maintaining an academic standard of reading and writing in the classroom. Although she recognizes that student motivation is important, she is not convinced that technology is always the best answer. “Literature can be just as fun and exciting as technology,” she says. Although her students enjoy using technology, her focus is on creating contexts where her students are thinking critically and creatively about literature and writing. Irene identifies herself as a “traditional teacher.” This stems from her conviction that in the classroom she is the “authority.” At times her lessons are teacher directed and she has used worksheets and given tests to assess if students have memorized their literacy devices and narrative forms. In my opinion, however, I believe her philosophy of teaching epitomizes constructivism. She creates learning environments that encourage discussion, reflection, engagement and critical thinking (Henderson, 1996). She also encourages her students to be actively involved in the process of their own “meaning making” (Bruner, 1990). Although Irene’s content knowledge is considered unparalleled by her students, they feel encouraged to use their own experiences and expertise to challenge her ideas and construct their own meanings from texts.

The narrative explored in this article is taken from a series of interviews conducted with Irene; the intent was to elucidate how her experiences with technology affect her vision of the place of technology in schools. This narrative also provides novice and experienced teachers a framework from which to reflect upon their teaching practice.

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Irene does not identify herself as techno-literate; she claims that technology does not really have a place in her life; yet upon discussion I am intrigued to discover that Irene does communicate to friends and colleagues through E-mail at least once a week and she spends extensive periods of time exploring new and innovative resources for her students on the Web. She will seek out software programs that support her students’ even if she is not familiar with them. For instance, when she learned how to use PowerPoint, she created an assignment that gave students the option of expression through this medium.

Irene’s inclination to position herself as a non-techno-literate user elucidates the subtle tension among English teachers regarding how, if and when they use technology and the degree to which they are willing to identify themselves as techno-literate. Is it possible that we are uncomfortable with accepting that

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technology might reshape our personal or teaching image? What causes us to shy away from identifying ourselves as techno-literate teachers in the making?

V: Do you E-mail teachers a lot?

I: No, I don't really E-mail teachers a lot. Just my friends at school. I look at the Net for relevant material. I look at poetry sites. I look at Shakespeare sites. I have a list that I consult. I look to see what is available for students to check out. I will sometimes suggest to students that they look up sites similar to [Coles'] notes.

V: How often would you say you use technology in that way?

I: Oh, at least once a week, sometimes much more.

V: So you use technology as a secondary resource?

I: That's right... but I don't really know much about technology.

Although Irene is not convinced that technology plays a substantial role in her growth as a teacher, she recognizes its potential; this is why she still attempts to venture down its foreign terrain. If a comfort level is established, however, she incorporates technology into her classroom practice more often. In many respects, Irene's philosophy of technology integration is mixed: she responds to her students' needs and desires but mediates this with her own priorities for the language arts curriculum.

Irene remarks how using technology sometimes changes classroom dynamics: "teachers must be willing to step away from their role as the 'traditional teacher' so that students can work more independently."

V: When you have used technology in the classroom, do you think it has changed the way you teach?

I: Yes, it [teaching] is much less directive, less teacher centered, much more student centered, and they [students] have much more control of what they do. That can be a good thing.

V: Do you think there are more classroom management problems with technology?

I: No. I think it opens up potential because kids can work more independently, in pairs, they can get feedback. I think it can be monitored. I don't think it is a bad thing. It is important to use it.

V: When you think of the classes you have right now, what do you feel is most important that they learn?

I: I certainly think about preparing them for university. Especially the grade 12's because I want them to feel prepared for university. That would be a major goal, for sure. I guess I also want them to feel competent in reading and writing. I guess that is skill-based, but I want them to have the tools to find out how to understand something, how to deal with it, and learn it.

V: Do you think that is a worthwhile change, using technology?

I: I think that it's fine that it exists, and money should be spent on computers. But I don't think that every teacher should have to become a computer expert. I think it can be used everywhere, but I also think that there are many things which the students' need to learn which have nothing to do with computers. I would also like to know what is happening at the university end of things. For instance, there is a technology conference on Feb. 29th. It is a big all day thing for regular teachers who are not technology savvy. Apparently there is a presentation by the UBC English department on how they are using technology to teach first year English. I would like to see that. I would be interested in seeing what they do because the professors I have spoken to have various expectations, but they have always emphasized reading and writing. The kids have to be able to read, they need to be able to write. They have to be able to trust their instincts and they have to be able to voice an opinion.

Some kids are very bored with discussions about literature in class, that's when technology might really work. Some kids find it [discussion] dead boring. Or, they just have a different method of learning. It does not mean that they could not do it or are not able to participate, it just means that they need a different format, I guess. Maybe it [technology] will provide that format, but students would still need to learn how to do it [read and write].

Irene often experiments with projects that give students an opportunity to draw on their technology skills. She reflects on her experiences with a PowerPoint project and the realities of relying on her colleague's support to do this.

I: I did have my grade 10 Byng Arts kids do a PowerPoint presentation on *To Kill A Mocking Bird*. They did their research on computer and they put together a PowerPoint thing. They presented to the class a historical aspect of the book that they could talk about. It is a really good project. I did it this year and last year. I have also done poetry on computer, that was two years ago. I asked my grade 12's to look up and make personal selection of poems that they could comment on. It ended up being fun for them and they learned lots.

I wouldn't use it all the time, but I do think it is good to include it. I think that the kids get a lot out of doing the project. As long as you don't have too many problems with the computer lab, that is a real pain, and it is a big time

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waster. When there are problems it really makes me reluctant to use it with the regular kids. I think the (mini school) kids can handle it because they can do so much of the work at home, if they have to. They don't have to depend on the computer lab.

I didn't introduce power point to them. A computer applications teacher at the school is a great techie. She introduced them to PowerPoint and even gave them a workshop after school one day on how to use power point. She really helped me out. I could do it myself but I am not confident enough.

V: I guess you would have to learn the whole program before going in there?

I: Right, but it also depends on your students. Lots of students are capable but in terms of communicating it to other kids it is much better to have a teacher do it. To have her [computer applications teachers] introduce them to PowerPoint and to support me and then to have kids who are also experts supporting me was great. It is the only way to do it.

V: Do you ever feel uncomfortable with the students knowing more than you in terms of technology?

I: Oh no. They know that they know more than me. Thinking about it, I guess it doesn't take huge amounts of time to learn how to do a PowerPoint presentation. I suppose if I became more comfortable with it then I might make it more of a part of my teaching...

V: One of the things I have found is that sometimes kids equate technology with entertainment.

I: [Computer applications teacher] does take care of that. She gave them an outline to follow which likened it to an essay that will give you a consistent form. Your intention is *not* to astonish your viewers with every frame. Your intention is to give a talk that is relevant to your topic.

I try to emphasize that with the kids, but they don't always believe that their thoughts are what matter. Sometimes they believe that it is all in the [glitz of the] PowerPoint presentation, no matter what you tell them.

In this scenario of designing a unit with the technology teacher is ideal because students can quickly access infinite amounts of information on any given subject. Discerning what is valuable on the Net encourages discussion, compromise and the process of "critical decision making." Irene believes that PowerPoint is ideal for presentations because it encourages students to think about what to emphasize and why. Students are also less inclined to divide the project up into isolated parts because PowerPoint presentations are most effective when created as a group; the group must work together on the development of each frame.

Obstacles

Despite the advantages, Irene has stumbled over obstacles that have rendered her reflective about using technology. She reasons, for instance, “it is a big time waster and extremely frustrating when computers aren't working.” Technology is unpredictable and unreliable which is problematic when the appropriate support is not available. And while technology facilitates some students' learning, it simply distracts or jeopardizes others. Computers provide an endless array of distractions. Oftentimes, instead of working on their assignment, students play card games, videogames, check hockey scores, or their E-mail accounts, or they might just chat with friends in a chat room. In order to avoid getting caught, students hide existing ‘open game’ windows behind ‘academic camouflage’ windows. When teachers walk by they pretend they are working by clicking on an academic window. Just one click of their mouse and they have returned to their window of games. Although this is what I usually observed when I saw classes using computers in the computer lab, Irene's class was slightly different. While at times students took a moment to chat, discuss, or explore the Net, they also seemed engaged in the process of completing the “assigned task.”

Many students equate computers with play; perhaps this is why some students forget that the content of the assignment is what is valued. For instance, when students work on PowerPoint presentations, they spend inordinate amounts of time working on sound effects and putting together a presentation that is visually impressive. By the same token, students do not place the same effort and rigor on developing the content of the assignment. Irene acknowledges that even if teachers are clear on their criteria and emphasize that the content of the presentation is what matters, “students might just not want to believe them.” Students enjoy working with computers so they might choose to only focus on the visual part of the assignment. However, if it weren't for technology, perhaps those students might not be engaged at all. Teachers who encourage students to use technology for presentations must create criteria that encourage the use of technology as a vehicle for critical learning, not just as a tool for play.

Conclusion

What is intriguing to me as an educator and a researcher is how integrating technology inevitably reshapes teaching and learning contexts. Irene, for instance, is caught between her role as an authority in her content knowledge and her uncertainties about if or how she should venture forth into technological terrain. Will she ever feel comfortable with this transition? If so, what factors will come into play to facilitate the process? What is the most appropriate balance for English teachers between continuing to develop students' print literacy (reading and writing) and students' use of technology? Part of the dilemma in answering these questions is that there is just not enough existing research documenting the long-term implications of technology integration. There is also minimal research that captures teachers' voices as a means of elucidating the challenges and potential of

integrating technology into secondary English classrooms. This narrative contributes to the first step, but there is a long journey ahead.

Educational policymakers argue that the implementation of technology in 21st century schools is necessary; English teachers are also becoming aware that technology is a cultural reality for many of their students; yet teachers still do not feel equipped with the appropriate skills or resources to effectively incorporate technology into their classroom practice. They are being asked to change, but are frustrated because minimal guidance is provided as to why, how, when or what. For many English teachers, new technologies are unfamiliar. They have immersed themselves in the world of print literacy since they were young; therefore, the emergence of techno-literacies may become intimidating. It is also easy, as an English teacher, to feel uncertain when techno-literate students and colleagues have developed such “intuition” for using technology; there is an internal dialogue and decision making process amongst them that can appear magical to those of who are not entirely techno-literate; regardless of how many workshops and professional development days attended, the world of technology still remains in the hands of an elite few. What is especially intimidating, however, is that asking to be initiated into this club inevitably means becoming subject to change; this is daunting given the minimal proof of what and how changes take place once the metamorphosis begins. Do we have a united understanding of what it means to be a techno-literate secondary English teacher in the 21st century? In our valiant attempt to move forward, are we leaving something already extinct behind?

I end the journey of this narrative on a personal note: as a secondary English teacher I have oftentimes found myself questioning why for so long I was hesitant to use technology. I ventured into my work as a researcher at UBC truly believing that the only reason I had not made more efforts to use technology was because I simply did not know how; I no longer believe that my reasons were so simple. Developing a knowledge base for how to use technology is crucial, however, just as important is exploring how our impressions of integrating technology impact how we define ourselves as teachers and learners within a larger educational context. Innovative teachers such as Irene spend inordinate amounts of time and energy exploring other resources, yet at times shy away from technology. Why? Notions of technology integration are saturated with existing images and connotations; there is fear around what technology integration “really means” and a distrust that has emerged regarding why new programs and policies have been created by those who are, very simply, not teachers. From this confusion, an illusion may emerge that technology is the culprit or the villain - not true.

Much like Irene, I initially equated technology with games and an entirely mechanical approach to learning. I had also convinced myself that using technology meant stripping my classroom of the creative process; this was not a direction I was willing to take with my students. All of these residing myths in my mind had somehow accumulated over the years and were preventing me from expending the time and energy for learning how to use technology in relevant and authentic ways. This is why I now believe it is so essential that English teachers be given appropriate guidance in how to use technology effectively. As was the case with Irene and myself, perhaps English teachers will invite technology into their

lives more often if it is perceived as an accessible tool that holds value for students' educational experiences.

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AFFILIATIONS

Vetta Vratulis, PhD student
Department of Language and Literacy Education
University of British Columbia