Technology Integration in the English Language Arts Classroom

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Technology integration in classrooms is spreading faster and with more power each school year. In order to prepare our students to succeed and thrive in the 21st century, they must be able to use technology to find and share information quickly and effectively. The English language arts classroom is an ideal environment for students to be able to learn these skills. Teachers can utilize technological tools such as blogs, video and digital media, websites, podcasts and web 2.0 tools in their classrooms. The use of these technologies has great potential to support and reinforce more traditional literacy skills such as fluency, reading comprehension, response to literature and writing. Teachers in today’s classrooms must find ways to teach and utilize both technological and literacy skills to prepare students for their future.

Proficiency in phonics, decoding and fluency are the basic components of developing literacy in students. Student must be able to read text accurately and fluently before they can comprehend and respond to literature. There are several technological tools that can assist teachers in helping students to build and practice these skills, especially when paired with more traditional teaching methods. Roblyer and Doering (2010) offer several suggestions for technology integration to improve phonics skills and decoding. There are a variety of websites, software programs that support letter/sound recognition and offer support to students in blending and segmenting words at various levels. Some notable examples mentioned by Roblyer and Doering are Between the Lions, Chateau Meddybemps: Fun with Letters and GameGOO: Learning That Sticks (p. 285). Tools such as iPods and iPads offer applications, known more commonly as “apps,” which can also give student practice in these basic areas (Smith and Okolo, 2010).

Once students have obtained basic mastery of phonics and decoding, improving fluency is key to helping students begin to more easily comprehend the text they have read. There are several software programs available to help students practice and improve their fluency. Scientific Learning offers a program called “Reading Assistant” which has the capability to use speech verification technology to “listen” to students read, correct errors and model correct pronunciation of words. It provides opportunities for repeated reading to improve accuracy and fluency and prepares reports for teachers to view student progress. However, teachers do not necessarily need to invest in expensive software to help build student fluency with the help of technology. For decades, Reader’s Theater has been use to help students build fluency through repeated practice and performance of familiar text. This practice can be brought into the 21st century by allowing students to create a podcast of their reading, rather than perform it in front of a class. The use of technology to permanently record their work also allows students the opportunity to reflect and critique their performance to help them improve in the future (Vasinda and McLeod, 2011). Additionally, the motivation of using technology can breathe life and excitement into what is, at times, a rather dry reading exercise.

Once students have mastered the basics of decoding and accurately reading text, teachers typically move toward improving reading comprehension skills. Grimsahw, Dungworth, McKight and Morris (2007) have studied the impact of electronic storybooks on basic reading comprehension. Electronic books can be found in the form of CD-ROMS or on Internet websites such as TumbleBooks ([www.tumblebooks.com](http://www.tumblebooks.com)). Electronic books offer a distinct advantage over traditional print books because they may have features such as word pronunciation, narration, sound effects, animations and hyperlinked vocabulary and dictionaries, all of which help support student comprehension of text. These features have potential to decrease effort needed to read and understand text that may be above a student’s actual reading level. The advantage of having the ability to listen to a story and manipulate the text helps students to produce more detailed retellings ( Doty, Popplewell, & Byers, 2001). Student enjoyment and engagement of the electronic text also helps make more sophisticated inferences. A caution should be noted, that simply listening to electronic story books has not been show to increase decoding skills for students to be able to read on their own. For students to reap the full benefits of electronic texts and be able to transfer these skills to print books, they should be listening to books that are appropriate to their reading level.

As students progress through school, the focus shifts from simply understanding text that they have read to responding to literature using higher order thinking skills. Traditionally this is done through papers, journals, comprehension questions and tests. This can be very dry, especially for today’s digital natives who are used to interacting and communicating in a technology rich environment. Online projects completed through blogs, wikis and student made websites provide opportunities to for students to engage in literature response tasks in an environment the is comfortable, familiar and interesting to them. Maslin and Nelson (2002) suggest students creating interactive web pages to introduce other students or members of the community to books they have read. By creating summaries of plot, character biographies and response activities for other readers, students become actively engaged in discussions about literature. More traditional responses to literature, such as journals or methods such as the REAP system (read, encode, annotate, and ponder) are typically only viewed by the student who completed the assignment and the teacher who grades it. Manzo, Manzo and Albee (2002) suggest completing these types of activities in an online, threaded discussion. This creates a more collaborative and sharable response that students see value in. Higher order thinking improves and reading comprehension increases as students visit and revisit text they have read to respond to other student’s comments.

The notion of written response to literature, with or without the use of technology is a seemingly easy bridge to cross for most teachers. However, there are other technological tools that can help students respond to literature and develop higher order thinking skills. Creating and recording videos is a highly engaging format for response that appeals to the students in today’s classrooms. Writing a five paragraph persuasive essay in response to an issue presented in a novel, for example, is not an authentic or interesting experience for students. However, by providing students the opportunity to make a movie to persuade the audience through filming of a commercial or documentary, teachers have noted increased student involvement, engagement and a higher quality of student work than they had previously seen in more traditional assignments (Miller, 2007). The production of such videos requires many of the same skills need to respond to traditional literature. Student must sequence thoughts, decide what details are essential to include and convey their ideas clearly (Lund, 1998). Students can improve these skills in an experience that is more relevant and meaningful to them.

Writing is the final area of the English language arts classroom that has great potential with the use of technology. Blogs, wikis and web 2.0 tools are tools that any classroom teacher can use to increase student engagement and participation in written assignments. Witte (2007), a high school English teacher, found that students in her class who were reluctant to complete written responses in traditional journals where eager to post original, personal works of writing to their personal blogs. She implemented a blogging program in her school, called the Talkback Project, to encourage student writing. The program was an overwhelming success and when school officials due to security concerns shut it down, the backlash and outrage from students was substantial. One of the best ways to improve writing, is to write often and regularly. Blogs and Wikis give students an outlet to do so. Writing in the English language arts classroom can also be supported with word processing programs to help with editing and revising (Sweeny, 2010). This stage can be one of the most painful and tedious steps in the writing process. However, students can make changes with ease and relatively little effort. Additionally, online resources can be used as guides and supplemental instruction to help students learn grammar rules and offer suggestions for improving a student’s style of writing.

The English language arts classroom provides multiple opportunities for technological integration. This is perhaps one of the easiest areas to integrate technology because of the variety of tools available for students to use. By introducing these tools into the classroom, English language arts teachers help student improve not only their literacy skills, but give them the knowledge necessary to succeed in a world that is infused with technology.

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