

Adapting Technology to English Education



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Our world has begun drastic change in the way that we live our lives. Over the last several years we have become more and more dependent on Computers. The Internet has become part of our everyday lives. Even teaching has become as of late dependent on the Internet, the word processor and the availability of these. The Internet has drastically changed our lives, its speed and availability of information is unrivaled. The word processor has changed how written work is revised, written and even read. And the availability of computers has changed the English education process tremendously. However, can a dramatic change in our society have only positive effects, or is there a danger of losing something important to English Education, when we adapt such a large new tool for teaching?

Perhaps the aspect that has changed teaching English the most is the Internet. It has given students and teachers quick and easy access to information from around the world almost instantaneously. So of course the research aspect of English was changed dramatically to adopt the Internet as the student's primary resource for doing research. In fact Nancy Patterson says in her article in 1999 says that her eighth grade students on the day before winter break were actually excited to work on their research projects, because they were doing the research on their computers. (Patterson) Gordon agrees in his article in *Computers and Composition*, "computers are not going to disappear from the worlds of business and professional writing. They are here not merely to stay but to become much more common and essential" (Gruber). In fact Gruber encourages teachers to incorporate computers in education when he says, "the trouble is worth it" (Gruber).

Pat Price an English teacher for more than 15 years at the Sophomore Honors level has mixed feeling about the Internet's effects how she has had to teach her students. She thinks that undoubtedly computers have changed English as well as education for the better. (Price)

She thinks that there are several positives, the first being that the students are more prepared for class. In other words, they are participatory, because they have more resources to help them understand the text. (Price) The students have help programs if they don't exactly understand something they are able to look it up. They also have alternative methods of teaching the material, like games and quizzes. (Price) Also she mentioned that the research that her students find seems to be more diverse than she has seen in the past. This is a huge positive according her. She said that it was very important to her that the students get a lot of different sources from a lot of different types of people. She said that recently there have been a lot of different opinions because more

people can read the work. She credits that to the fact that there is so much more information available and its easier to find and use. (Price) She seemed to show more concern however with the negatives. I think that is because as a teacher you have to make sure that the student is working to their potential. So she is more concerned with what negatives that the Internet creates.

The biggest problem that she seemed to focus on was keeping the students honest. For instance with all of the reviews and Internet study questions, the student can try and get away with not reading the material, because the summary is on the Information Super Highway. This really bothered her. She says that she is excited that there are more students participating, but she thinks they are not reading the material, but reading the summaries on the net. (Price) She says "I have to work harder to make sure that the quizzes cover material not in the summaries." (Price) In fact she says that she has adapted an entirely new system in the last two or three years to stop students from plagiarizing, and encourage them to do actual work. She requires all of her papers to be put through a web-site called www.turnitin.com. This web-site is designed to take all of the information entered into it and analyze it for any possibility that anything is not original. What this does is it takes every paper that is entered into it, and compares it to every paper or article that has been entered into it previously. It then gives the teacher a color, the darker the color the more of the paper is the same as something else. She also warns that, "Although the Internet is a wonderful tool for research, the student must be aware that the Internet is open to anyone, so you have to be careful with your information. Because they're really is no way to tell if the information is accurate." (Price) Professor Breu of Illinois State University shares this concern, He says that the Internet has made research more convenient, but there is not a real definite way to evaluate the resources as useable or just opinion. ? (Breu) When I asked some students, I asked three high-school students and 7 college students how they evaluated information when researching. One of the high school students said that he didn't have any specific way to determine if the source is valuable, (Ramos) the other two as well as three of the college students said that they use a site that ends "in .edu" or ".gov". (Kurtz) This ending in the web address means that a school or the government runs the site respectively. Usually they said that the teacher sees that and knows it is not just some person's web page. Then they use other sources that coincide with that source. The other 4 college students said that they like to find several sources and they find the opinion that is most common among all of the sources. (Helgeson)

The other major advantage that the Internet has given teachers is e-mail. Email has enabled teachers and students to communicate outside of class. Any questions or times that students or teachers can't make class or need to bring extra materials, the teacher no longer has to call each individual student. The teacher can write one message and contact all of the students and avoid busy work, because they forgot to tell the students to bring certain materials the day before. It also enables the student and teacher to give extra assignments. The student also has another way to turn in an assignment that they actually did, but are having problems with printers or they forgot it. In general e-mail has enabled

teachers especially in High school or college to be more productive than in the past.

My personal experience is that the Internet is a positive resource to use in teaching English. I think that as long as we keep adapting to make sure that the students keep learning and improving themselves, then as teachers we should accept and encourage the digital revolution. Having said that I think that when we as teachers try to make life too convenient for students, we are losing important aspects of teaching. For example, classes that are taught on the Internet entirely should not become the future, I have friends that have taken them at my community college and they cheated. There is no way to keep them honest, and you don't know who the person is that is taking the test and their opinions cannot be shared in a classroom setting, which I personally feel like is the most important part of English. It is a class designed to teach students how to understand others and express their own opinions. That is what the English language is a way of expression. I don't feel that the student gets the same privileges as they would in a classroom, where they can share their ideas. The other thing that may happen with the use of the internet is the loss of classic works. For example I was in my American literature class reading some Dickenson. Someone in our class had the poetry off of the Internet and it didn't translate exactly. The Internet version left out the dashes which were crucial to the interpretation of her work. I began to wonder if books themselves will someday be phased out by the Internet. I think that the future would be missing out on so much of what makes literature an art, and so much meaning that you can't get without sitting down and reading from a book.

I think that another aspect that incorporating computers in teaching forces English teachers to adapt to is the word processor. The word processor has changed how written work is constructed. (Breu) The reality is that most written work is done with the help of one of these programs. These programs have made the writing process a lot easier. To begin with it has given students an excellent and easy way to revise, because they can save the ideas and add to it or remove from it as needed. Professor Breu says that this is the thing that he likes the most about computers in his classes. He says that the revision process is easier for the student and faster and the more the paper is revised the better overall it becomes. (Breu) It enables the student to keep what is good and add new things as they are writing. In a study in the Chronicle of Higher Education, agrees with professor Breu. On average students from grades four through ten scored on average 10 percent higher, when they were allowed to use a computer to write their papers. (Carlson) This study really sparked my interest, why did the students score higher on the computers than the students who were handwriting the paper? I found later in the study that after the exam the students filled out a survey and most of the students said that they preferred to use a computer to write the paper. Since revision is not really a possibility, because it was timed, I was curious. I asked Pat Price what she thought the reason could be and she said that it is sometimes easier to write on the word processor, because you are able to really view what you are writing. (Price) She goes on to say that

sometimes your own handwriting can be difficult to really pick out of a paragraph, or that students are more aware of what they are writing when they are typing. (Price) I conducted a survey of 14 college students and found that 12 of those 14 said that they actually preferred to use the computer as well. In fact one of the two who preferred to handwrite says that she prefers to handwrite, but still uses the computer most of the time. Mrs. Price went on to say that it is a possibility that students are making small grammar and spelling mistakes, which the word processor will automatically fix. (Price) I always had the opinion that as long as the final product was better than of course it would be better to use the technology that is available. But Mrs. Price warns against depending on them. She said that like the Internet the word processor might become too convenient. (Price) Students are not learning basic grammar and spelling because the system will fix it for them. She likes to make her students hand write about one third of their work. (Price) Professor Breu agrees but said that it enables him as a teacher to focus more on the student's understanding of the work, because little things are picked up by the program's spell and grammar check. (Breu) He goes on to say that when he misspells words and they are corrected by spell-check that he actually tries to fix his mistakes. "I actually write down and remember the word so that I can learn to fix the problem." (Breu) I didn't think this would be common among students, so I asked. I found that out of 14 college students only four actually checked the words the other 10 just let the computer fix the errors. So what does that mean? At least some of us prefer to use the technology for help but the average just doesn't care about how well they spell.

I personally think that it is very easy to revise your work with the word processor. I know that I write better with my computer than with a pen and paper. I asked the same three High school students and all three said that if they were given the choice all three said they would prefer to use a word processor. So I think that it is inevitable and that it is smart to use word processors to teach kids how to write, as long as we continue to teach them at an early age how to write with their hands with extra emphasis on spelling and grammar.

When I began my research these were the only two aspects of the computer that I thought affected how we teach students writing. However I came across another problem and that is the availability of that technology. Not only is it a problem that the technology itself is not necessarily available to everyone, but the fact that when we adopt computers as a way of teaching we must teach the students to use them.

I began with an assumption that every school was as fortunate as my schools. I never stopped to think that even if the student did not have access to the Internet or a word processor at home, they might not even have access to it at the school or the library. When I thought about my classes now and in the past I could not imagine how different it would have been without a computer in my home or at the school. When I turned in my project for a peer edit I received some personal experience with an availability problem. I never thought that when we are required to type so much or answer study questions on the Internet how difficult it must be when a student has to work on that in the library or at a friend's

house. This can be a problem when the income of families which can not be assumed to be equal.

I also discovered that a common problem with adapting computers as a teaching tool was that the students have to be computer savvy to use the technology. I remember in middle school, that we spent weeks learning how to research and how to use the word processors to make works cited pages. Trevor Owen and Geoff Thompson agree in an article in *The English Journal*. They said that although their attempts to bring computers into their lessons, were mostly successful, they had problems with the computers not helping them with the intended lessons. (Owen) They had to focus more on teaching the students and themselves how to use the different software, or programs. This put less focus on English studies and more on teaching computer literacy. This can have an adverse effect on teaching English, because although the computers have a great deal to offer to English Education, it is not the English teacher's job or responsibility to ensure that the students know how to use a computer. This takes away from other English related work. There is a possible solution to this problem that I think may enable the teacher to incorporate the technology without the need to instruct the students to use it. At an early age assuming that students have access to a computer through the school, the students should take a specific class, Other Than English class to ensure computer literacy. For example I think that I can understand how a student could be turned off at an early age because they cannot type fast. I know that when I was younger I had my mom type my handwritten papers because she could type so much faster than I could. I never took a typing class and actually taught myself how to type.

I found that the computer will, if it has not already become a large part of our everyday lives. The use in schools of this technology has already begun. The positives of using this tool in education are tremendous. I feel strongly that the computer has enhanced everyone's lives tremendously. I think however like any new methods of teaching we cannot just jump in and scrap the old method. In English the writing process will improve tremendously with the use of word processors. Research has been made incredibly convenient fast and more in depth. I think that like any technology that is adapted during the period of change we as teachers have to be cautious about some of the problems that this change has brought on. I think that we cannot take a side on whether the internet is good or bad for education. English so far has been the subject that has been stuck with the job of adapting students to use these computers for research and how to express themselves. I feel strongly that students as well as teachers are becoming more and more dependant on this technology. I think that the more we depend on this technology to do things for us, the lazier we become. I think that that may be the opposite of education. Students must grow and learn for themselves and get better. I think that the key to a successful future is a proactive smart attitude for the future. As teachers we have to make the students work and adapt this technology without losing sight of our goals. I believe that if we can control the use of the technology, we can slowly adapt to using the computers to enhance how English is taught and learned.