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i-teaching in the 21st Century

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Liz deBeer

i-teaching in the 21st century

My graduate school professor used to do a shtick about how teachers have been using the same practices since the beginning of time: worksheets, lectures, tests. The witty professor would then jump around, imitating doctors, architects, chefs, and other professionals who have moved into the 21st century with x-ray and sonogram machines, computers, calculators, convection ovens and other modern devices, stressing that too many teachers today rely on the same methods used centuries ago. The professor would conclude: “What are you going to do to improve teaching methods?”

Last year, the 21st century reached into my classroom and threw out most of my lesson plans; all the students were assigned laptops, and we teachers were told to incorporate technology fully in our lesson plans, as per the grant which awarded us the money for the laptops. After a group primal scream, we ignored our concerns about giving teens 24-hour access to the Internet and reworked our lessons and assignments. While I may, in many ways, be a graying old dog, I had to learn new tricks.

Edmodo, a free Internet service that is marketed as “providing teachers and students a secure place to connect and collaborate, share content and educational applications, and access homework, grades, class discussions and notifications” (www.edmodo.com) became my virtual knight in shiny armor, literally carrying my papers and books. It looks like Facebook, but it serves as a viable educators’ tool that connects school to students’ contemporary learning styles. The advantages are myriad. It’s secure—every class receives a code, and each student is approved by his or her teacher (so strangers can’t see or participate in the class’s work). Further, parents can receive a separate code, which will grant them access to only their own children’s assignments and grades. It also links with other Internet sources. For example, when I ask students to write sentences using vocabulary on Quizlet (see

below), I give an assignment and that links directly to Edmodo; students have instant access to the exact web page. Students have access to poems and short stories online (that are now accessible due to expired copy rights). The adolescents celebrate their lighter backpacks too!

My favorite: most papers and journals I assign are submitted virtually via Edmodo. Papers don’t get wrinkled, spilled on, ripped, or lost. No student can tell me that I must have lost the paper; it’s either submitted or it’s not. If students lack Internet access at home, they can type on Word at school and submit the essays in class. Also, students can submit a thesis statement or a works cited page separately, for my inspection prior to the final paper, without my having to deal with little bits of scrap paper. Other fun devices on Edmodo include virtual polls and quizzes, although I rarely use these features..

In contrast, Quizlet, an ideal website for studying vocabulary, literary terms, and basic facts about literature that offers students easy access to more rote-type learning, is marketed as “simple learning tools that let you study anything, for free” (www.quizlet.com). I can easily create vocabulary cards generated from works read in class, and often find that these words have definitions already programmed into the system. Furthermore, I make review cards for each major work we read, in order to help students prepare for quizzes and tests. Certainly, parents appreciate having instant access to these basic notes and terms, so they can help their children review. There are even simple games to engage students more fully. (My favorite is Scatter, even though several students beat my time—but, in my defense, they are younger and have better hand-eye coordination.)

As we rushed to fulfill the goal to update our curriculum to the 21st century, I reflected on the obvious downfalls. While it’s thrilling to discover sites that jazz up our lessons and even provide study guides and printouts, the concern is whether these cool sites actually improve learning. Often, as at my school, teachers are told to develop computer-friendly lessons without much guidance, and too

often the 21st century classroom becomes an electronic workbook. Some critics caution that computers generate tasks that are essentially “simplistic, mindless assignments that would never have passed muster had they not had the window dressing of using a computer” (Wenglinsky). Certainly, an overuse of even valid sources such as Quizlet, or a program we pay to use, called Study Island, can be abused and become tedious—taking away from more valid learning. Teachers can become lazy and overuse good sources, such as virtual worksheets, generated by sites like Grammar Bytes (www.chompchomp.com), which incidentally has excellent power points about grammar.

Often, teachers resort to simplistic computer-based assignments because they may lack training in computers. One study concluded that “students profit [most] when their teachers incorporate computers into instruction in ways that promote higher order thinking skills in specific content areas” (Wenglinsky). The older the cohort, the more important it is to use computers “to deepen their [students’] thinking” (Wenglinsky). In fact, critics surmised that the best use of computers in high schools involves encouraging students to use computers outside of school for research and presentations.

For example, when I assign a multi-genre research paper connected to *The Crucible*, my main requirement for the oral presentation is to avoid boring me. **Since laptops invaded my school, the students’ projects have become more complex and high tech.** Clearly, when students generate original works via their laptops, their high tech projects turn out to be much more impressive than a simple power point or even a fancy worksheet. The multi-genre project involves both traditional and nontraditional learning, including library work, a works cited page, internal citations, and a multi-genre report. Instead of rephrasing an encyclopedia article, students write poems, fictional emails, cartoons, and fictional newspaper articles about various topics ranging from exorcism to Salem today, diagnosing witches, McCarthy, Communism, voodoo, WICCA and other contemporary witch trials. For the oral presentation, students in past years (who did not

have laptops) have indeed generated creative responses, including a performing a parody of Lady Gaga with a song about witch trials, or another’s sock puppet presentation about McCarthy. With the laptops as inspiration, the presentations have become more technical, and often more complex, certainly engaging in higher order thinking skills and deeper thinking.

Using laptops, students—even the weaker ones—have developed i-movies and other computer-generated work for this project. This past September, two girls worked together to make a dramatic movie about diagnosing witches, in which one, dressed as a witch and was seen swimming by the other girl, dressed in austere, Puritan-type garb. Another pair made an i-movie about exorcism, in which one of them mimicked a possessed person and the other acted the part of a minister exorcising the former. A pair of boys opted to do an “old-fashioned” skit about Communism in which one of them was interrogating a Russian immigrant and learning about politics there. The boys brought the skit into the 21st century by placing a picture of the United States Capital building on the white board via the laptop. Another pair made a slide show on the white board to create the sense we were on a tour bus; the girls showed the inside of the bus and, after reading us strict rules (like no gum chewing), they showed slides of the major attractions in Salem today. The class was fully engaged during each presentation, as was I. Not a thing was boring about these assignments.

Recently, I learned how to move the traditional power point presentation into the 21st century, using another free device called Prezi, “the zooming presentation editor” described as “a cloud-based presentation software that opens up a new world between whiteboards and slides” (www.prezi.com). It feels like a 3-D presentation, rather than a slide show. This is also an exciting option, especially when students work in pairs. I spend a little time showing the students how to make a basic Prezi, and, in about 15 minutes, most of them surpass my skills. What I love most: kids can each be on a laptop or computer and edit simultaneously. Because it is cloud-based, the Prezi is always available—it’s saved on the Internet, not some kid’s laptop. Students used Prezis when they did presentations on Anglo Saxon and Medieval England; as with other laptop presentations, most students pushed well beyond

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the minimal requirements because they were having fun. When generating the Prezis, students interacted with each other, as well as with multiple sources, which certainly reflected independent, creative, and deep thinking. (Many felt competitive to make presentations better than my simplistic one, which proved this site is a strong motivator). I use the free option with Prezi, but some of my colleagues pay a fee to access some fancier backgrounds.

Whether it is an ice cream truck's bell, falling snow, a Tetris challenge, or a text message, students will continue to find distractions from learning. Truthfully, we all do: I turn into a drooling zombie when the foods teacher starts baking gingerbread for the gingerbread house project each December. I have read and taught many novels, plays and poems dozens of times; a rattling window or a car alarm pulls my attention away too. So my major rule applies to me also: don't be boring. **Most of the kids want to**

try new things and challenge themselves, especially if they can use laptops, the web, and basic creativity. They also love to see us teachers break out with something new. Last year, I felt like a wild dervish of English, making new Prezis, Quizlets, and iphoto musical slide shows. I experimented with such new web sites with the aid of friends, colleagues, and my own children. With each fresh presentation, I was disproving Oscar Wilde: "Everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching" or the cliché: "Those who can: do. Those who can't: teach." **We teachers must learn, and do, modeling how to keep both teaching and learning evolving into the 21st century and beyond.**

Works Cited

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