Technology’s Impact on Student Engagement

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1. Introduction

State College Area School District is a district that encourages and promotes technology use in the classroom. Teachers in this district are all equipped with a personal laptop and receive more than basic training. More often than not, classrooms are equipped with projection units, televisions, and/or additional media equipment. Instructors in every subject attend rounds of technology training in order to enhance their competence and familiarity with various computer programs, online resources, and available media. By integrating all of this technology, we hope to enhance our students’ experience in the classroom. Does technology help teachers teach? Does technology help students learn? These questions and many others drive educators to take an in-depth look at the impact technology has in the classroom.

During my time in the State College School District, I have worked constantly with technology. I have been introduced to it, received training, and worked with it in various forms, on a daily basis. At the beginning of my internship experience, I was given a MacBook for the duration of the school year. Accustomed to my out-dated desktop PC, I was overwhelmed by the state of the art laptop. Still, I could not imagine how necessary it would become. Why did I need this laptop in order to be a teacher? I spent an entire day, led by district technology personnel, learning how to use my new computer and certain key programs. Again, after all of this preparation, I attended two separate training sessions during the beginning of the year. With each successive experience, I began to understand the large role technology would play in my teaching experience.

Though the laptop and its programs and uses were strange to me at first, my students were completing comfortable using laptops from day one. Technology surrounds
our students every single day. Hayes (2007) cites a survey by Grunwald Associates that says “71% of tweens and teens between the ages of 9 and 17 visit social networking sites weekly” (p. 59). They are growing up in a world full of website, blogs, MySpace, video and computer games, U Tube, MP3 players – the world is at their fingertips. Now, it seemed, that the district was striving to bring the same amount of technology into the classroom. This constant exposure brought certain questions to my mind. Chiefly, I wondered how my students who react to and benefit from this movement? Can technology use in the classroom increase student engagement?

Perhaps the greatest promise of anticipated technologies is their potential to transform schools through innovation. Students themselves are driving innovation. They are willing to experiment, collaborate, and immerse themselves in new ways of communication, learning, and getting things done. (“Hot technologies” 2006, p. 12)

When talking about technology, there must be certain parameters and explanations. Because this paper will discuss my personal inquiry and experience as a Professional Development School Intern, I need to state specifically what tools and media I use in my classroom. For the purpose of this work, the term technology will refer to teacher and student laptops, access to the Internet and Internet resources, a projection unit (used both as an overhead representation of the teacher’s screen and as a television), DVD’s, and audio CD’s. The term also allows for the use of digital cameras, both still and video. I have not worked in a classroom with a Smartboard and therefore the term “technology” in this paper will not refer to that classroom tool.
Through research, observation, and inquiry, I have truly come to appreciate the role of technology in the classroom. Specifically, I have found that using technology in the classroom increases student engagement. Students are interested in new technology, they enjoy working on laptops, they like to watch movies, and they understand and connect to song lyrics. What teachers may struggle to learn and implement, teens connect to quickly and effortlessly. This understanding increases their engagement in the classroom.

To ascertain technology’s impact on student engagement, one must first understand the definition and signs of engagement in the classroom. Engagement is a broad term that covers physical, academic, and emotional responses. “We know enough today about engaged learning to see that unidimensional conceptions of engagement do not capture the fullness and depth of authentic learning” (VanDeWeghe, p.88). As VanDeWeghe states, our pupils experience different types or levels of engagement. Learning can be approached in many different ways, and therefore we must accept that there are varied levels of student engagement when this learning is taking place. According to VanDeWeghe, this multidimensional engagement can include behavioral, cognitive, and emotional levels (p. 89).

The different levels or dimensions of engagement include assorted student responses or actions. When students are physically engaged, they are sitting in their seat, looking at the teacher, and working on the current assignment. Academic or cognitive engagement takes this behavior to the next level. Students who are cognitively engaged are not only looking at the teacher or the text, they are putting forth effort to successfully complete the task they are given. These students are working to find the correct answer,
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to successfully complete the assignment. The final and perhaps the hardest dimension is emotional engagement. A student who is emotionally engaged is personally interested in the lesson. This student puts forth more than the required amount of effort. This student completes the work because he or she is interested in the topic, intrigued by the assignment, and intrinsically motivated to do the work. This student wants to involve the rest of the class and learn more for the sake of learning. Teachers want to teach engaged students. We want to find ways to excite our classes and encourage them to learn.  
“Researchers have found correlations...between behavioral engagement and academic achievement on such measures as standardized test scores (VanDeWehge, p. 89). Technology is a tool that teachers can use to spark engagement on all three levels; technology clicks with our 21st Century students.  

I will explore the use of technology in the English classroom though my observations of both 7th and 8th grade middle school classes. The following journal entries, titled as such, relate some of my personal experiences and observations of technology and its impact. These observations of technology in the classroom include Remote Desktop, film clips, podcasting, and online discussion using Moodle software. After each journal entry, I will explore the topic further and comment on various tools, projects, and student reactions. Entries may also focus on the topic of student engagement. These observations will illustrate many different instances of technology integration in a middle school English classroom.

II. Engagement
Next is the problem of kids just choosing not to work during class. I don’t understand how to motivate a student who understands the assignment, has the assignment in front of him/her, and still does not choose to work on it. I’m sure that this comes up often - some students don’t self-motivate - others do. How can I deal with this situation when it comes up in the classroom? I want the kids to WANT to work on their assignment and not just work because they think that they will be in trouble if they don’t….I think that these students need the encouragement and one on one work ten times more than the students who are following along and doing what they are suppose to be doing, but I’m not sure how to give that attention.

When this situation (a disengaged student) arose today, I tried several things. First of all, I stood next to the student and read over her shoulder hoping that proximity would encourage her to snap back into focus. This action only made her stare at the screen and look like she was thinking. I bet that she was thinking and don’t want to imply anything else, but she obviously needed a nudge in the right direction. Next time I came around, I asked her how she was doing on choosing a topic, and she replied that she was doing just fine. In spite of her answer, there was still nothing typed in her outline (which she was suppose to be filling out). These techniques just didn’t seem to be enough. Finally I came over to her desk, squatted down, and started to talk with her about possible subjects. I suggested several, and we talked about ideas for each of these. We went through possible outlines for two different topics, both of which would have been fine for her paper. When I left, she had started to type, and I felt sure that she had an idea now
and would start working slowly and steadily. Despite all of this attention, she didn’t manage more than those few words and was at the same place when I returned to that side of the room. When many of her classmates had started on their first draft and had completed one or two paragraphs, she had only just begun to fill out her outline.

As this entry illustrates, engagement is necessary for learning to take place. A teacher can work to encourage student interest in the lesson, but in the end, learning depends upon the student. The individual has to decide if he or she is willing to focus on the lesson and expand some energy and thought during class. If the student chooses to ignore the lesson, then a teacher cannot force learning upon the individual. In my entry, I wrote about helping a particular student begin a writing assignment. The girl was extremely open to suggestions and teacher guidance. She was friendly to work with and always agreeable. In spite of her positive attitude, she was not engaged. As a student, she was not focused on the work at hand. She was happy to have help; she was not poorly behaved. Still, she continued to fall farther and farther behind the rest of the class. This is a common example of a lack of engagement in students.

A student who does not understand the lesson or the material may often struggle to remain engaged in the lesson. It may prove to be easier for struggling learners to disengage or “zone out” in class than it is for them to try to struggle to comprehend a challenging lesson. It is difficult for a teacher to determine whether students who understand the material are engaged, or if engaged students are able to understand the material. No matter what the relationship, we want all of our students to be engaged in our lessons. Students who participate in class are able to ask questions when they are confused, contribute their opinions to class discussions, and interact positively with their
peers and teachers. No teacher wants a student to feel excluded because of a lack of understanding. The challenge, then, is to explain the subject or lesson as fully and clearly as possible.

Journal Entry: 9/27/07

After the PDS seminar yesterday I do have some more thoughts about things to watch for and things to try to do in the classroom. Mostly I want to emphasize the change of pace. My mentor already does a great job of varying the activities; we almost always have a film clip, something on the Internet, or a recording to listen to in addition to reading and writing. I need to remember all of these things (in addition to the names of the DVDs) so that I will be able to implement them as well. This constant change makes things fun. The kids are very visual and seeing things often helps to clarify the theme or the descriptions that they read in the story. The trick afterward is to call upon those instances. In the video that we watched today, a talking bird represents the main character’s conscience. This is a great example of symbolism, but I need to know to pull that out and talk with them about it. Are there other parts in this movie that I should illustrate? I am doing the same lesson with the fifth period class.

The fifth period lesson went well. The students enjoyed seeing the movie of the myth, even though it wasn’t especially elaborate. I think that film clips really help them to visualize the story. Seeing the details can help to clear up any confusing parts or even make the story more cohesive. This is especially true for struggling readers. If they aren’t able to picture the action as they read, this clip allows them to see the story that they might remember reading, but couldn’t fully interpret.
The best way to transform these baffled students into active learners is to clear up their confusion. Visual learning is often an effective way to elaborate your instruction and eliminate confusion. The previous journal entry detailed one instance where a visual representation of a literary term furthered students’ understanding of the story and clarified the meaning of the word. I could have taught the class what the word “symbol” meant, and then explained what was symbolic in the story. Many students would have understood my explanation. Some students would have been able to pick out other examples of symbolism. Other members of the class would have listened to my explanation, but would not have been able to find examples or use the term in the future because they did not fully understand it. By bringing in a visual example, I was able to explain the term in a different way. The students could see and understand the symbol in this visual representation. Middle school students are often very concrete in their thinking and understanding. Abstract ideas or concepts are harder to comprehend because many of these boys and girls have not had a lot of experience thinking in this way. Visual representations can take an abstract term and give it substance. Now, once the students understand what the class is discussing, they can participate and learn instead of disengaging and zoning out.

Journal Entry: 10/1/07

Today’s inquiry: why are visual representations so effective in class? We are teaching a class that is all about reading and writing, yet the film clips that we use are extremely beneficial. I always thought that the clips were to boost the student interest; they would have more fun watching something than they would simply hearing about it.
All of this is true, but there is definitely more to it than that. Even though the students enjoy watching film clips, they also seem to learn more easily from them. I know that I mentioned this point earlier when I was talking about my 7th grade kids and the mythology clips. It is amazing to me that something as complex as symbolism can be clearly illustrated on a clip when it can be so confusing in the text. Why is this the case? Are the students more accustomed to processing visual information? With the increased use of computers, they are still seeing a lot of written text, text messaging, instant messenger, emails, and all of those things. But, despite all of these print resources, the visual aids really seem to hit home.

Now that this is clear, I need to find the best way to use visual learning in the classroom. The big stumbling block here seems to be making it relevant and connecting it clearly to the literature. You don’t want to have classes watching clips just for the sake of watching clips – you need to be able to justify the film in a very clear (undisputable) way. Andy makes good use of online film clips to teach short lessons on grammar. (Brain Pop) These little shorts work well for grammar, but I don’t think that they have the impact that literary connections to clips do. The literary ideas and devices seem to be the hard part to understand so those are the parts that we want to emphasize in our alternative media.

I also need to be thinking about other way to have projects that are visual. Podcasting is a great example of a new kind of project that the students get very excited about. The finished product in this work is exciting to the. Very few students get excited about ending up with a three-page paper. It isn’t very much fun to write and it isn’t very
fun once you are done. When they completed their podcasts, they were proud of the final product, they had a sense of accomplishment. I think that if you could find a way to make every project (the bigger ones, of course, probably not just homework) feel like that, the students would be much more excited about working on their assignments!

One method that I used fairly successfully to increase engagement was a wide variety of in class activities. Students at this age, 12 to 14, have a fairly short attention span. Even if a student is interested in a discussion or activity, their attention will likely falter after a certain amount of time. In order to accomplish my lessons, I realized that I needed to change activities several times throughout a period. My mentor structured his lessons in this way and the outcome was incredibly positive. Using a variety of technology was one way that I changed the pace of the class and the activities that we did.

Journal Entry
9/6/07

I’ll start on the first one of those two because it’s something I’m starting to realize more and more. This changes from class to class, but we seem to fit a lot of small assignments into one class period. For the teacher this involves a lot more planning and it can be tricky to make all of the assignments line up. But, on the other hand, this constant change pulls the kids in to the class. If you only spend ten minutes on one topic there isn’t as much time for students to get bored and let their attention wander. I wonder how long kids at this age can stay engaged (focused on one thing or topic)? Is there an actual amount of time that they can pay attention before they start to think of other things?
That would be very helpful to know! If you could plan a lot of small activities that all related to each other you could actually cover a subject MORE thoroughly without boring your students.

Some of the little things we do to change pace:

- Warm-up work sheet (these are usually scored for class participation)
- Online quiz or short activity
- Review homework
- Take a quiz as a class
- Watch a video clip
- Listen to a music clip

These are just some of the short little activities that we put together to make an entire period. One other way to do this is to work on several projects at the same time. Right now, our students are working on their journals, their informational essays, and they are reviewing basic grammar. When we do all of these things in one day, the kids get to move from one project to the other. Even if you are really struggling with one of these assignments, you only have to work through it for fifteen minutes of your class period.

This whole break down of the class period seems to be VERY IMPORTANT for middle school students!!

From the very beginning of the year, online exercises and resources were part of our daily routine. All classes started their period by coming into the room and looking up at the projector screen. On the screen was the agenda for the day. Students often began to work before the period officially started. I frequently used a variety of activities
throughout a class to hold the students’ interests. Technology allowed me to include this wide range of activities, all of which were directly related to the topic we were covering. From the beginning of September, my classes worked with laptops. On the computers, we frequently used online discussion forums, word processing programs, online dictionaries, did online research, and created projects as part of our varied class activities. In addition, classes listened to CDs and watched DVDs during certain units. All of these forms of technology have been present in the classroom throughout the year.

**III. Writing with Laptops**

Using technology to facilitate the writing process can have positive results. Laptops encourage students to write when the majority of the class is comfortable with the technology. In the State College Area School District, most students are comfortable typing on a keyboard. Though some students struggle more than those, most kids have had practice on a keyboard. Common word processing programs, such as Microsoft Word, can simplify the process of writing. First of all, many students find it easier to type a long piece as opposed to writing it. It is uncommon for students to turn in a handwritten paper that is longer than a page. Most substantial assignments must be typed in order to be accepted. This usually works in the student’s favor. There are also many benefits to writing in a word processing program. Automatic formatting creates an attractive looking piece. Spelling and grammar check alert students to errors in their writing. Though these tools are not a guarantee, they do encourage students to edit their work. Along these same lines, word processing programs allow students to revise their documents with relative ease. A boy or girl can delete entire sections, cut and paste to reorganize, and reformat
their document with a click of the mouse. These aspects all combine to allow students to produce better pieces of writing.

As mentioned above, laptops encourage student revision during the writing process. I have touched on several aspects of this already, but the benefits are substantial. My classes produce longer works when they use a computer. The work is easier to interpret for the teacher because type is clear to read than some student’s handwriting. Students and teachers can communicate via the laptops to further edit or advise. In addition, students have the option to work from home and simply transfer the file to school or email it to a teacher. Papers are safely saved so that an original is never completely lost. Using laptops to aid student writing can lead to many benefits, both for teachers and for students.

**IV. Remote Desktop**

*Journal Entry: 9/10/08*

> Here is the end of the first week and the beginning of the second. All of the classes are rolling along better and we are starting to get into our first units. There are still some problems (maybe questions would be a better word) that I’m having so I’ll have to think about them this week.

> The first thing and maybe the biggest thing is working WITH the students. For instance, how do you give advice to a student in a way that makes them take it? As our students work on writing their informative essays in class, we use remote desktop to supervise and comment on their work. With this tool we can look at a student’s screen, look over their work, and send them comments and suggestions. This form of advising works very well because it doesn’t interrupt the other students in the class, and it hardly
interrupts the student that you are interacting with. You have a minimal disruption as you work so the classroom remains quiet for the working students. This also gives the teacher complete control of the laptops. Because the teacher isn’t circulating around the room, the students aren’t aware that their screen is being monitored. You can observe and/or control any computer in use in your room (or one of your computers that is being used in another room). Once the students know that you can see everything that they do they are much less likely to check their email during class!

Remote Desktop is a software tool that I have successfully used to increase student engagement. This technology allows me to view and even control student laptops as my students are working. In the previous journal entry, I mention two uses for Remote Desktop. The most common classroom use of this program was revising and editing. As students worked on their papers, I could observe their screens and read the papers in progress. If I choose, I could control a student’s screen, and write a comment on his or her paper. This immediate feedback encouraged students to think about their writing in the moment and emphasized the importance of the writing process. Students were encouraged to revise and rewrite their pieces and spend time on the process. The Remote Desktop software allowed me to be a very active part of my students’ writing and revising process.

The editing possibilities with Remote Desktop were especially useful in our English classes. I often used the program when my classes were working on writing assignments. I could easily observe a student’s screen, read his or her paper as it was so far, control the screen, add comments, and then move on. This method of editing worked
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very well for several reasons. First of all, it was efficient. Because I didn’t have to walk  
around from student to student, I could work much more quickly. If a student didn’t have  
much written yet, I could move on to the next and allow him or her to keep working. I  
could quickly and easily insert comments on a student’s paper, almost without  
interrupting the work. This also made editing faster for the class. Working together with  
my mentor, we could respond to the entire class in one period. This method also  
improved the quality the students’ papers. When I was able to read a student’s  
introduction, I could see in what direction his or her paper was headed. If the student  
needed to adjust the focus or reorganize the essay, I could tell him/her right away. I was  
able to stop students from going too far down the wrong path. This method of editing  
allowed me to get students on the right track from the very beginning. A final good point,  
though certainly not the last, was classroom control. As I mentioned before, being able to  
see all of the students’ screens allowed me to monitor the class without walking around.  
When a class knew that a teacher would be watching their screen, they were motivated to  
focus on the task at hand. Students, generally, worked on their assignments and used their  
class time productively. Looking at all of these benefits, you can see how useful Remote  
Desktop was in our classroom. This program was used not just to monitor student  
behavior, but also to facilitate learning and student success.  

Remote Desktop also allowed me to monitor the entire class as they worked. I  
could see, at a glance, what program each student was accessing on his or her computer. I  
could see what each individual was working on, if I choose to observe his or her screen.  
Finally, the control feature of Remote Desktop allowed me to freeze students’ screens at  
any time. If I needed to have the attention of the entire class, I could lock their laptop  

screens and thus remove the distraction of the computer. Once directions had been given, I could unlock the screens and the work would resume. I used all of these features in our classroom with varied regularity. In different ways, each use of this software enhanced the learning that took place in the classrooms.

Journal Entry: 10/9/07

Another tool that we use to help with the writing process is Remote Desktop. This tool allows us to look at the students’ screens as they write and comment on their work. This method of proofing is not disruptive at all because the teacher can see everything that the students are doing and writing without even walking around the room. I can, and do, pull up a student’s screen, read their work, and insert comments on their paper. I can point out small mistakes, tell them what looks good so far, and tell them which parts need to be worked on or reorganized. Using this program really helps to stop poorly written papers almost before they start. I can head off problems before the whole paper is a problem, and I can help students get on the right track. This method also allows for more revision. Every teacher who has graded a paper knows that you can’t fix every thing in every paper. You choose the parts that need the most work and you focus on those. If I can edit the paper from day one, I can go more in-depth with the student. Because I have headed off any major problems from the beginning, we then have the chance to look more closely at style, word choice, and detail. Students need to have the chance to look closely at their papers and see what the next step in the editing process is.

I think that this all illustrates the usefulness of technology in the classroom. The laptops are an invaluable part of this process. Each part of this that I have highlighted is working toward the goal of making good writing a more attainable goal. Teaching
writing will always be hard because there is no “right” way to write. The best that we can do is guide our students with good examples and positive feedback.

The advantages of using Remote Desktop increased student engagement in several ways. By using program to observe and control screens, I was able to deter off-topic behavior. If students were using the laptop for something other than writing, I could see and stop the behavior. This quick and effect redirection kept my classes focused on the task at hand. The prompt feedback also kept students interested in the writing because of its immediacy. Students were interested in their writing in the moment, and I was able to capitalize on this excitement by responding quickly. Remote Desktop allowed me to praise good writing and redirect writing that was in need of improvement. This direct communication between the teacher and the student made the entire writing process very dynamic. This active partnership encouraged engagement during the writing process.

V. Film

Journal Entry

The fifth period lesson went well. The students enjoyed seeing the movie of the myth, even though it wasn’t especially elaborate. I think that film clips really help them to visualize the story. Seeing the details can help to clear up any confusing parts or even make the story more cohesive. This is especially true for struggling readers. If they aren’t able to picture the action as they read, this clip allows them to see the story that they might remember reading, but couldn’t fully interpret.
One form of this technology that successfully incorporates visual images and information is film. Teachers have often used this form of visual media to enhance their classes, and provide students with a visual component to a lesson. Film clips are often extremely useful because they provide this stimulation. In addition to reading about a concept and visualizing the people and events in their head, the students love to see the images. Film clips or full feature films can be used to supplement a lesson or to add a completely new component. A video of only a few minutes may be just as useful in illustrating a concept as an hour-long class discussion. This form of media can be extremely varied and multifunctional.

I used video clips in many different ways, particularly in my Medieval Literature Unit. A video clip often helped the class to refocus on the topic or inspired them to think more deeply about the ideas that we were discussing. One day in class, after a few days of reading about King Arthur and his Knights, we watched a video clip on medieval armor. The short clip came from http://www.history.com/media.do, a great resource for video shorts on a variety of topics. The movie showed the class what armor from the Middle Ages time period looked like and how it was put on. The narrator explained what the various pieces of armor were called and how they protected the wearer. This four-minute video provided interesting information about the medieval time period. The clip livened up the class and served as a great change of pace for the students. This short video not only added a different dimension to the class, it also offered additional information on the topic. Later in that unit, both of my classes watched a History Channel video about the figure of King Arthur. This DVD special worked was much more effectively later on in the unit. The classes needed to have some background knowledge
in order to appreciate and understand the film. In both instances, the class enjoyed and benefited from the integration of film into the lesson.

Students in my classes responded very positively to films and film clips in a variety of circumstances. We often used film clips in addition to literature in order to present visual images or expound on certain ideas. Students enjoyed watching films and film clips for many different reasons. Whether it was a movie in its entirety or a short clip, the class always responded positively to the experience. This enthusiasm was most often transferred to the topic that we were currently studying. The film stimulated the excitement and we benefited from that enthusiasm for the rest of the class, week, or even the rest of the unit.

**Student responses:**

**Student One:**

*I also liked getting to watch (the movie) 12 Angry Men and the Ken Fitzhugh trial. I think that I did get a lot out of those and understand how trials work and what the jury really does. I didn't realize before how much importance the jury had. Getting to watch the movies made English class so much more interesting and I think that it was really fun but it also had a direct connection to our justice unit. In conclusion, I really enjoyed all of the activities and they were mostly all constructive for me.*

**Student Two:**

*I think some things I like in class are things like the movie clips and the interactive things. I don't like to be lectured all class, and this class lets me do things hands on. I think this class is a lot more fun than others.*
Student Three:

*I think it is also fun getting to watch the movies and then have an interactive activity that has to do with it.*

Student Four:

*I think that watching the movies and discussing them was the best way of learning. It wasn't because they were the most fun activities (but it did help). Watching the movies helped me to learn because it showed examples of different lives of people and I could relate to them.*

Student Five:

*I really think that reading The Giver and then comparing it to The Truman Show. I really learned a lot from comparing them because although they were different I also thought they were the same and pointing them out really was a good learning experience. In contrast to being a good learning experience I also thought it was really fun. Like right now for the justice unit, 12 Angry Men has really helped me understand visually some of the law and justice concepts. I really like watching movies and doing things with them because they are fun and they imply what we are learning in our studies.*

Student Six:

*I also liked the film clips from the different movies because it was interesting to compare and contrast the different stories...*
These students state many different advantages of using films in class. Different students appreciated different aspects of the clips; some liked the visual aspect best, while others enjoyed the change of pace. Several kids really engaged in the comparing and contrasting activity that compared the novel, “The Giver,” to the film, “The Truman Show.” Finally, a large portion of the class enjoyed watching the recording of a live trial because it allowed them to step in to the courtroom and take part in the action. Student comments clearly illustrate multiple benefits to the use of film in the English classroom.

When our students are having fun they are engaged and they are being educated. Now in their second century, movies deserve a legitimate place in the classroom and the curriculum with creative middle grade teachers using them to both reach and teach young adolescents. (Considine, p. 14)

The benefits of a visual representation of material, as I have explained, are great. During our reading of Louis Lowry’s *The Giver*, we showed our students several clips from the film “Pleasantville.” The purpose of this was to illustrate what it would be like to suddenly see color in a world of black and white. The idea of color was central to both the novel and the film. In order to show students what this experience could be like, we showed several movie scenes where characters saw a glimpse of color in their black and white world. This image allowed them to reflect on the idea of color and its importance. This, in turn, deepened their understanding of the book and its themes.

The following discussion is in response to a question concerning the lack of color in the world of the Giver. Students watched a film clips from Pleasantville and used this visual representation to explore the idea of a world without color.
Anne Maddox
Inquiry Draft

6th Period English

A World Without Color

by Student - Wednesday, 19 September 2007, 01:20 pm

It (the lack of color) takes away individuality, and keeps sameness intact. It also makes it so there’s no race differential. It limits your choices. You can't pick out what you want to wear or any choices that involve color. If we had a colorless world, things would seem more dull and boring. Color has such a huge impact on our world because we've grown up seeing it. So much depends on color.

Re: A world without color

by Student - Wednesday, 19 September 2007, 01:24 pm

Yeah that's very true. I understand why they took away color but I think it was a poor choice. We don't really think about color much because we've grown up with it. I can't imagine a world without color.

Re: A world without color

by Student - Wednesday, 19 September 2007, 01:24 pm

I also think that life without color would make things really boring and dull. I personally would hate not having any color!

Re: A world without color

by Student - Wednesday, 19 September 2007, 01:29 pm
You’re right, it (the lack of color) does limits race differential and keeps everything the same and if you take them away then things would be very different and you wouldn't be able to see the colors on a fire truck or and ambulance because it would be too dull and if you can't see those then it could get really dangerous.

The students responded to this post after viewing the movie clips. By combining the movie and the novel, we were able to ignite some abstract thinking on the topic of color. As you can see in the comments, students were able to go beyond the basic “it would be boring,” and look at different issues such as individuality and discrimination. Viewing the film clips helped students to visual the setting and events of the novel and through this visualization they could crystallize their understanding of some of the major themes.

Both the clips from “Pleasantville,” and the film “The Truman Show,” increased the students’ interest and engagement in the unit. These tools were not used instead of a traditional lesson, but rather were used to supplement that lesson. The class learned from watching these movies because they were interested in them. In a similar example, I cannot picture a classroom full of seventh graders sitting through a lecture on pieces of armor, and yet that same class was completely captivated by a short film on that exact subject. The medium through which the information was delivered made a large difference in the response. The film was also instructional, but in a slightly different way. While the film did teach some new material, it mainly served as a tool to recount what the class had already learned. “Many teachers are nervous about teaching a new language—which is what film is. Yet in our experience, teachers become quite comfortable quite
quickly and become more aware of how they can use films to supplement classroom instruction” (Considine, p. 13). As you can see, videos have multiple uses and benefits. Students, overall, respond well to films or film clips. They automatically assume that they will enjoy watching the film and are therefore more open to receiving and processing the information. “Today, like no other time in our past, we have the opportunity, the tools, strategies, techniques, resources, and standards to make film the powerful teaching tool Thomas Edison once thought it would be” (Considine, p. 15).

VI. Podcasting

Journal Entry: 9/12/08

Now our next step will start tomorrow as we draft the final copies of the poems and start with podcasting. I’m excited because Andy liked my idea of using my computer to take a picture of every student so that we can print the photos and display them with the poems. The finished product should be awesome. The kids were very excited about this project and I think that the subject was really what pulled them in. They like to tell people about themselves. This is a great example of how much hard they work and how much more involved students are when they CARE about what they are doing.

This entry refers to seventh grade podcasting project from the beginning of the year. The classes read a poem titled “Where I’m From.” Using an outline, each student began to construct his or her own version of this poem. The students did get very excited about this project. As a final publication, each student created a podcast of their personal poem by recording a reading of it and adding pictures and music. They all loved this
additional media aspect of the assignment. To add to the podcast, I used my MacBook to take a picture of each student. I emailed the pictures to their school email accounts so that individuals could add a picture of themselves to the final podcast. Most of students printed out a copy of picture and added it to a printed version of their poem as well. This initial podcasting project sparked student interest from the very beginning.

Journal Entry: 9/13/07

We started the projects for the Where I’m From poems today with our 7th grade class and it went really well! It’s a lot of fun for them to do more with the project than just write it. I know that Andy publishes some things for the 8th graders but any kind of project with a piece of writing is great. If the students get to do more with something than just complete it the whole assignment is more fun and they can see a larger purpose to their writing.

My idea to take photos of the kids on my computer went really well. The picture taking was easy and they had fun with it. Now everyone will have a picture of themselves in their email and they will be able to use this as a photo in their podcast. We also asked them all to print out the picture at home and bring it in so we can add it to the framed poems that we’ll put up in the room. I think that they are really taking pride in their work on this project. Tomorrow we will get to work more with the podcasting part, which should be fun as well. The students are recording themselves reading their poems. This whole project is a great example of bringing alternative media into the classroom. These students aren’t only reading (the original poem) and writing (their own poem), but they also get to add sound and visual effects to their work. I have already heard some of the
students say that they really like this class because they get to work with technology so much.

The “Where I’m From” poem podcasts were a success on many levels. From the beginning, my classes were very comfortable with technology. Even though my mentor and I taught them how to use the program, GarageBand, they quickly outgrew our model. Many of the students learned quickly because they were excited about the project.

Printing out a piece of writing is the normal product or publication in most classrooms. With this project, the students had an opportunity to create a different kind of finished product. They had the opportunity to add more to their assignment, to add pictures, and music in order to give a real representation of themselves. Their engagement in the project led to some truly amazing final products.

B=0&c=59201&24971259122348Nav=|1933|&NodeID=887

You can check out some of their final podcasts at this address.

In addition to adding excitement to the project, the podcasts added the element of speaking to the assignment. In the Pennsylvania State Standards, English classrooms are required to teach speaking and listening as well as reading and writing. Podcasting is an excellent medium for teaching and analyzing speaking skills. As my mentor and I taught the classes how to create their podcasts, we talked about the important of voice quality. When I worked with students who were recording, I focused on the quality and clarity of their voice. The goal was to be loud and clear! I reminded students to read slowly, not to rush, and to go back and listen to their own recording. This recording was often a challenge because most of the students were not accustomed to hearing themselves talk!
Many students took several tries before they produced a quality recording. Still, in the end, the classes really understood how important the speaking element was to the project. As we listened to some examples in class, the students had a chance to hear some clear and some less than clear readings. This proved to be a great way to encourage students to evaluate their own speaking skills. A teacher wasn’t telling a student that they read too fast; the student actually heard him or herself reading too quickly. When we listened to the final products, we heard the deliberate and careful reading that came from days of practice and multiple takes.

Journal Entry: 9/17/07

Another Monday and we’re already rolling. Our seventh graders are well into their podcasts by now and they love the project. The poems by themselves went fairly well, but the students are really enjoying this chance to work more on the project. What has surprised me most in this assignment is how comfortable the students are with the technology! It took a lot of work on my part to make my podcast look (almost) the way I wanted it to. In a short two periods, these kids have reached that same point and they continue to experiment with affects and such. Having the chance to create something as cool as this podcast has really excited the students. It is also a great example of a multi-media lesson. Not only do they have their poem, which they wrote on their own, but they are now combining that with photos and music to create a fully rounded project. Though I thought that the technology would be challenging, these students have quickly mastered the needed skills and are really enjoying perfecting their creations.
Podcasting, like any other classroom tool, must support the curriculum and educational goals that are already in place. The goal must be to enhance the students’ education. Burniske (2000) reminds teachers to, “remember traditional approaches even as they experiment with new ones” (p. 213). Traditional approaches still are valuable. We want to seek new sources that will bring an innovative dimension to reading and writing. Rozema (2007) states that podcasts can be both informative and entertaining (p.32). In this case, students would be able to express their own knowledge through the creation of a podcast, while at the same time creating something enjoyable and having fun. The expression of student knowledge is the tie to traditional curriculum. Classes are learning the standard concepts as they study the standard literature. Now, with this new tool, educators are presenting a new way to express that traditional knowledge. The material has not changed, but student learning and expression has. Now, classes are taking what they have learned and illustrating and presenting it in a new ways.

While podcasts do demonstrate knowledge, they also enhance the student’s learning experience in other ways.

Publishing a podcast gives student writers a real audience, a new opportunity for purposeful writing and revision, a chance to collaborate with peers, and – unlike the fusty book report – a genre that actually exists outside of the English classroom. (Rozema, 2007, p. 32)

This form of publication gives students a purpose for their writing. When compared to handing in a book report, publishing a podcast lends students more purpose and may elicit more engagement in the learning activity. In addition to this product, students have the opportunity to create a project that can extend beyond the classroom. An audience
much larger than one’s teacher and peers can view a podcast, once it is shared or published online. Now, with this potential audience, the student has the responsibility to create a product that is worthy of viewing beyond the realm of the assignment. This is the purposeful writing that Rozema (2007) mentions. “As with all forms of online publishing, podcasting about books gives students a real audience” (p. 35). The possibility of digital publication can enhance the quality of student work because it showcases it publicly. In a podcasting assignment such as this, students are called to work hard and to deepen their thinking in order to clearly express themselves and their ideas through this new medium.

The public aspect of this technology is not the only feature that blends well with the classroom, and specifically, with the study of literature. Podcasting can also encourage students to more fully understand or interpret the material as they approach it in an innovative way. Rozema (2007), in describing a podcast created by his students, said,

…it is evident that students are working to capture the essence of the novel . . . . In our attempt to teach the concept of mood, we often ask students to describe the emotional feel of a literary text, all the while knowing that the mood of a piece is hard to define and highly subjective. (p. 32-33)

Podcasting presents opportunities for students to express the elusive elements of mood and tone as they interpret literature. The addition of music and images provides chances for students to elaborate beyond words. At the direction of the teacher, students may be instructed to include a soundtrack that illustrates the tone of the novel. “Asking students to match music to language gives them a more concrete way to understand and talk about mood” (Rozema, 2007, p. 33). All of these elements combine to provide a fresh
opportunity for students and teachers to explore the traditional classroom material more deeply and thoroughly.

With its many potential benefits, podcasting is a new technological tool that merits the attention of educators in a range of grade and ability levels. Podcasting is not a new requirement for teaching literacy, nor does it guarantee enhanced learning. What this new tool does guarantee is an opportunity for teachers and students to experiment and grow. Burniske (2000) reminds us, “students need to acquire better understanding of their own learning style and process, as well as become better critics of their own work” (p. 191). Podcasting may present this opportunity for self-reflection with the knowledge that the end product will be public. Teachers may choose to try this as a method of publication that extends beyond the classroom in order to lend additional meaning to their assignments. Students might approach this as a chance to more fully develop their experience and interpretation of literature in a new and innovative way. Opportunity is the only guarantee, but the positive experiences highlighted by Rozema (2007) argue that this opportunity is one that educators should not ignore.

In the English classroom, podcasting may be used to present and reinforce themes and interpretations of literature. Does podcasting truly achieve these ends, or is it merely a result of the pressure on teachers to adapt to the changing times? Rozema (2007) tells us, “Teacher- and student-produced podcasts are becoming more and more popular at every instructional level, as educators explore the medium as a new way of teaching and learning” (p. 32). Popularity is not a guarantee of success. “Technology alone will not save teachers from weak pedagogy or literacy skills” (Burniske, 2000, p. 213). Teachers
must fully explore the possibilities of this new medium before they incorporate it into their classrooms.

When considering the possibilities that podcasting offers, student excitement is an aspect that educators must appreciate. The opportunity for publication, the variety of options for self-expression and interpretation, and the outlet for creativity all encourage students to enjoy the project. It is this excitement that leads to student engagement. Revering to the threefold engagement model, excitement and personal motivation fall under the emotional engagement category. This, perhaps the hardest type of engagement to encourage, is what teachers want to bring to their classrooms. In addition to the multiple benefits of podcasting in the classroom, teachers may use this technological option to increase their students’ engagement in a unit or piece of literature.

**VII. Online Discussion (SCoodle)**

Journal Entry 9/13/07 continued:

> The 8th grade classes today were doing more talking about The Giver. Andy set up a discussion forum on SCoodle (our online course management system) and they went on, posted an answer to a topic, and then responded to classmates. After they got started, the students really got in to talking to each other and sharing their thoughts on the chapter. As they talked and responded to each other, they came up with new ideas and
new insights to the reading. It’s a great way to get students involved because they don’t have to talk out loud or raise their hand. If a kid is especially shy and might not feel comfortable talking in class, this approach allows them to share their thoughts with the teacher and the class and still not have to share out loud.

By 6th period today I was able to sign in to SCoodle and respond to and read the students’ posts. They did a wonderful job of feeding off of the ideas other people posted. The discussion forum is a great idea and the students seem to be really excited about it - which is the best part. They love to get on and see what people say and talk to each other. Just having the computers involved takes a boring writing assignment and turns it into an activity that can take all period and keep the class totally focused on a topic. Awesome! The students are making great predictions about the book and what they think is going to happen. I would like to have come more ‘why?’ questions for them when I make up some of the forums. I realize that we need to work up to those more theoretical questions, but I also think that these ideas are the meat of the novel. Why does the community want everyone to be the same? What is scary or bad about difference? What is bad or wrong with sameness? Why aren’t people allowed to pick their spouse or their job? Do you agree with the reasoning for this? When you start to talk about these topics you go deeper into the meaning of the book and really start to unravel some things. What are they missing? Is it a good thing? I hope that I have to chance to ask or post some of these questions. For the more in-depth ones a forum would be much better than an in class discussion because it would give them more time to reflect and share thoughts. Maybe we’ll get to that point!
Online discussions are another tool that educators can use in order to increase student engagement in the classroom. As I said in the previous journal entry, my classroom uses SCoodle, an online course management system that is specific to the State College School District. My students have used this program since the beginning of the year. In this entry, I talked about some of my first impressions of the system. The classes used SCoodle to talk over some questions generated by Louis Lowry’s *The Giver*. Just being able to bring computers in to a book discussion excited some of the students. More than that, however, online discussion enhanced our reading and analysis of this novel in many ways. This double benefit of enhancing the literature studying and engaging students made online discussion a powerful classroom tool.

Online discussions offer students the chance to interact with classmates and teachers in a digital environment. Some educations believe that there are benefits to this kind of interaction. Smith (2001) writes, “advantages of online classes result from psychological aspects of the medium itself. The emphasis on the written word encourages a deeper level of thinking in online classes” (par. 17). This deeper level of thinking may stem from the fact that this medium is more public than an in-class discussion. Any student or teacher who is part of the class may view these comments online. Student and teacher comments will appear as typed messages, available for all discussion members to read, usually available for some form of response. Clearly, these messages, which exist online in written form, last much longer than a verbal opinion ventured during class. The same comments are also more public in the sense that they are published on this online space. This permanence and publicity may inspire more thoughtful work on the part of the students. If this is true, the resulting discussion will be more detailed and in-depth as
participants are encouraged to give a greater amount of thought to their responses. English (2007), in considering this element of blogging, tells us, “I believe students want to represent themselves in a positive way in an online space” (p. 58). Again, the publicity of the medium can encourage a more profound and thoughtful end product.

Though some students may produce higher quality work online, some may continue working, unchanged, at their accustomed level. With this in mind, we must find other reasons to validate the use of blogs. English (2007) suggests another possible encouragement for the use of blogs. “The silent student is not a new phenomenon, but the use of online discourses has become an amazing ally to the teacher who cares about giving voice to every student in the classroom” (p. 59). Because online discussion lends a certain distance to the conversation, quiet or shy students are often more likely to join in the conversation. This form of interaction encourages all class members to participate fully in discussions. Burniske (2000) describes an assignment, during which students interacted online,

Because this was their initiation to a new medium many of the students found this exercise particularly challenging, but notice how much they accomplish through this telecollaborative effort. Their discussion helps them sort through questions as an online community of inquiry, discovering, and casual relationships that they had not previously considered. (p. 101)

In-class discussions do not provide ample time for each student to discuss his or her opinion. In addition, the classroom instructor cannot respond in detail to each comment offered. Classroom discussions are limited by the time and setting, but online discussions are not restricted by these boundaries. In her article, English (2007) cites Wolsey’s
opinion, “teachers and other students can interact more with students, and he notes that the online forum removes students from the social positioning of a classroom, which is why some students never find their voice or express themselves” (p. 59). The online discussion board or blog clearly offers some new opportunities and support for the more quiet students in the class. Though benefits may not be this pronounced for all students, an online forum will encourage all students in the class to jump in and speak up.

A specific benefit of using SCoodle’s online discussion with the novel, The Giver, was the opportunity it presented to get the entire class involved. The class read this book at the beginning of the year, so the students weren’t necessarily comfortable with their classmates yet. Boys and girls were still working out the kinks from summer, and deciding what kind of eighth grade student they were going to be. It was often difficult for me to engage students in class discussions. Talking online proved to be the answer to these struggles. We didn’t stop having class discussions, but the students began working online for a significant amount of the class time. As I read the responses to these online questions, I had the opportunity to hear the opinions of each individual student. Instead of interacting with the same group of students, those who speak up in class, I had the chance to hear from the entire group.

Here is an example of a discussion thread from SCoodle. One student responded to a question on Sameness, and then classmates read her post and comment on it. I usually jumped in as well and responded to student posts.

*In The Giver the idea of Sameness is visible. First, based on what you've read so far, how does everything appear to be the same in the community? Second, discuss the benefits and drawbacks of living in a place where everything, absolutely everything is the same.*
Perhaps, jealousy, crime, greed, and even desire wouldn't exist if everything were exactly the same. How could that be a bad thing? Ponder that in your responses.

Student One

It is a good thing because your stuff will not get stolen or that you can't get made fun of because they all wear the same stuff so people couldn't say o that is so ugly or stuff like that. It is a bad thing because you could have your own personality or individuality. Also it could be a bad thing because you may not have a sense of accomplishments of having your own things instead of everything being given to you. Also choosing your own jobs and spouses and having your own kids and instead of people giving you kids. Also it could be a good thing because then you wouldn't have money so you wouldn't have to worry about getting food or going out to the store.

Re: Sameness!
by Student Two - Friday, 14 September 2007, 01:54 pm

I agree =p

Re: Sameness!
by Student Three - Friday, 14 September 2007, 01:54 pm

I think you might need to have some more good things because the bad overpowers the good, but otherwise it's really good, and I agree with you. But wouldn't you like to have different stuff than other people sometimes to see who is who. HaAH

Re: Sameness BY SHANNON!
by A. Maddox - Friday, 14 September 2007, 01:55 pm

I would want to choose my own spouse and number of kids too. Why do you think that they don't have that choice? Is choice bad? Do you always make the "right" choice?

Re: Sameness!
by Student Four - Friday, 14 September 2007, 01:59 pm

I think some choices people make are bad but I
Scoodle also highlights another important aspect of student engagement: student-to-student interaction. Students enjoy the online discussions because they aren’t necessarily interacting with just the teacher. Posts are available to the entire class, so you are really talking with your classmates. In the example thread, some of the students are specific friends, but others are not. You are not limited in your responses, so any classmate may respond to any post. Students have the opportunity to put their opinions out there, to share their ideas. As you can see, the responses were very positive. This is almost universally the case. As she explains the reactions of her students, English (2007) comments on one of her pupils, Josh, and the feedback he received from a classmate. “The brief response validated Josh’s response to the literature, something he may not have risked in a small group, and he may not have received a response like this from anyone in his small group” (p. 59). Because Josh received a response from another student that supported his opinion, his ideas were confirmed. Josh may not have gotten this confirmation during an in-class discussion. In this way, Scoodle is a very safe environment. The safety, student-to-student interaction, and use of technology all encourage students to join in and be part of the discussion.

In addition to receiving support and encouragement, online responses may also improve academic understanding as well. In a discussion of information literacy skills,
Nelson (2008) suggests that immediate and repeated feedback can strengthen the desired skills (p. 89). Online classrooms or discussions are an ideal medium for such feedback. Nelson (2008) also says that, “Students can be asked to provide feedback to a peer and to help each other develop their information literacy skills” (p. 89). When conversations take place digitally, participants respond to one another as well as interacting with the instructor. This communication fosters a form of parallel learning; students begin to teach students. Though Nelson’s comment may prove true, teachers must be aware of student-to-student conversation and be prepared to limit any negative feedback. The opportunity for positive communication does not eliminate the possibility of negative criticism.

As students are able to interact with one another in the educational space of a blog or other online forum, the class may begin to direct their own learning. While teachers guide the discussions and the topics, students often have the freedom to speak with their classmates and pose new questions and ideas. As new thoughts and questions are raised, the students may begin to shift the direction of the course. Rather than relying entirely on the teacher to inspire thought, the students have inspired each other. This inquiry-type learning can give students autonomy in the class and in their education.

Journal Entry: 9/20/06

After I talked to Curt today in our meeting, I have been thinking a bit more about engagement in the classroom. In some ways this is a hard cycle. Kids who do well in class get to be in small, well-behaved classes and because they are well behaved, they get to do cool projects. As they do the cool projects, they get excited about learning and have the chance to build up good ideas and they get praise for doing well. So, as I think about all of
this, I’ve decided that the challenge is to still make fun projects for the kids who don’t “deserve” it. Yes, it’s is easier and more fun for a teacher to do an interesting project with a small and advanced class. But, in the long run, a large class of poorly behaved kids might benefit more from that project. The hard part then becomes designing an effective plan so that you combine the fun parts, the learning part, and still make it all manageable.

A big part of what we are doing this year in the classroom is tying together media and English education. When you think about the role of language, it is mainly about communicating. Communicating leads into media. When our kids are able to take literature and grammar and vocabulary lessons and learn them while they are creating a podcast or an iMovie or taking digital photos they are integrating these two areas. This technology is very interesting to kids and they are almost naturally good at taking the technology available to them and making it do exactly what they want it to do. The ability to combine this interest with literature creates an amazing opportunity for the teacher. Literature isn’t a dead study, we see connections in our every day lives so we need to study it, at least in part, in the context of our every day lives.

A Student’s Response to using SCoodle in English class:

I think that we have had a lot of really great activities in English class this year. One thing that I actually really liked, was getting to do the SCoodle posts. It was really interactive, and I think that I was able to learn a lot from it. I liked getting to see what other people thought and what their ideas were. I think that overall,
it was a really good idea. I also liked how you could access it from home. One of the days that we had SCoodle journal in class, and I was sick that day so I was able to do my SCoodle post at home so that I wouldn't get behind. Oh, I almost forgot, I also really liked getting feedback on my work on SCoodle. It really helped me and I think it was really quite efficient. Thanks!

Overall my students had a very positive reaction to SCoodle. As this student states, SCoodle is a very active form of communications. Students were able to share their thoughts and opinions learn from classmates. This form of discussion was fun because it was student to student. The class didn’t have to rely on the teacher for a response to their idea. Instead, classmates responded to each other. This also helped to promote a sense of community within our classes.

When teachers did interact with students on SCoodle, the communication was quick and easy. An instructor could give feedback or a response as soon as a student posted on the forum or journal. Students could check this feedback and make revisions or revisit a trouble section as soon as they receive the comment. This loop of response and editing is fast and productive. Prompt feedback is often more effective because students are still focused on the task at hand. When a boy or girl sees the teacher response they can go back and edit their reply before the period has ended. This way, little or no learning is lost between edits. Quick and easy online communication is only one the many benefits, but this method of interaction does lend itself well to the classroom.

A large part of SCoodle’s success was the positive reaction that students had to it. Our classes were excited to interact in this space. They “liked getting to see what other
people thought and what their ideas were.” This was an interesting way to share ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Also, as was mentioned before, students had the opportunity to interact with other students. The dialogs were not just between a student and the teacher.

A great deal of the interaction did not include an instructor. This was a space for students to talk to each other about the class material. This student-to-student discussion was often more lively and inquisitive than the in class discussions. Conversations were also more inclusive, tending to welcome rather than exclude others. As one can say, this is a promising ground for questioning, learning, and growing as a student.

**VIII. Possible Concerns**

*Journal Entry: 9/25/06*

*We discussed SCoodle in all of our classes today and tried to warn them all about the messaging feature. I will probably be giving this talk to the sixth and seventh period classes. The point is, I don’t want to trap the kids or get them in trouble so we need them to understand that all aspects of SCoodle are controlled and monitored by the school. It is a tool for in case and therefore nothing is private. One of our top students actually lied to Andy about making a comment about a classmate. The comment was only slightly mean teasing and was said to a friend, but it still needed to be stopped before it went any farther. The student first denied saying anything and then changed the story to say that she was responding to someone else. When the record proved her wrong she was obviously embarrassed and didn’t know what else to say. We need to let the students know what they should expect so that they can use this tool in the proper way.*
This journal entry illustrates one of the possible negatives of integrating technology into the classroom. Every time a new element is added to the classroom there are positive and negative affects. One downfall of using laptops for projects is the possibility for negative communication between students. Email, online discuss, and other venues open the door for online bullying and negative interaction. Bully or poor behavior in this medium is just as unacceptable as it is when spoken aloud. I continue to watch for any instances of this in my classroom. Still, one possible benefit to this use of technology is the fact that we, teachers and technology staff, can monitor this type of student interaction much more effectively than spoke or written comments. When bully or other unwanted behavior occurs online, teachers can access it, read it, and determine the best course of action. Even with this possibility for correction, we need to realize that technology bring with it some drawbacks, such as this, that we need to be aware each time we use it.

Despite the praise that technology has recently garnered, integrating and utilizing technology in the classroom must be thoroughly planned and approached with caution. New resources will not automatically solve old problems; these resources may easily spark their own struggles. Each new tool or resource requires a great deal of training on the part of the instructor. This is time spent in addition to the everyday classroom planning. Students too must be trained in order to successfully use and benefit from technology. Nelson (2008) warns that students “need specific skills to work with the large amount of information at their fingertips” (p. 80). When we realize this, educators must question if this time required for training is well spent. Even though these technological
tools and resources are becoming easy to access, they are not instant solutions, nor do they offer instant advantages.

One thing that every teacher could use more of at one point or another is time. While technology can save time in the long run, it is often difficult to implement or use without practice. Students and instructors both must be willing to spend time becoming accustomed to the tools that they are planning to use. Even something as straightforward as showing a movie can easily stall the class. More elaborate programs and projects may take longer amounts of time to master. Online resources must be researched and explored, and students must be trained to use laptops and introduced to new programs and web resources before these tools can be used quickly and easily. An instructor must consider this time and plan accordingly if he or she wishes to introduce something new to the classroom. If the teacher plans to continue to use a specific tool, time spent can be well worth it. On the other hand, if a form of technology is only intended for a specific unit, class period, or activity, a class may lose a large amount of time just in the mechanics of the task. In order to use technology effectively in a classroom, the teacher must be aware of the required introduction, training, and practice needed to use that technology efficiently and productively.

In addition to class time, technology also presents some struggles for students. Some boys and girls struggle with the use of laptops, online resources, and other equipment. Most of this difficulty can be overcome with patience and practice. Distraction may be a longer lasting problem. While technology does an amazing job of engaging students, it can also disengage or distract students. A laptop computer is a prime example of possible distraction. When students are working on a project with a pencil
and paper, the only distractions are those things in the room – classmates, objects on the
desk, the teacher, and sounds of the room. If we replace the pencil and paper with a
laptop, that same student suddenly has the world at his or her fingertips. When the paper
becomes challenging, a learner may choose to check email, change their desktop, or surf
the Internet. Though a teacher can monitor the room for such behavior, some students
will probably persist. Even more basic distractions are possible. Students may play with
the keyboard, toy with certain parts, or play with the mouse. All of these distractions are
created by the presence of a laptop at a student desk. Like every tool, technology has its
downfalls. The benefits can outweigh the disadvantages, I believe, but teachers must be
willing to address the hardships if they want to reap the rewards.

After all, not every use of computer technology enhances the learning
environment. Not all pedagogical strategies succeed all of the time with all of our
students. Nonetheless, how can educators determine whether something will work
if we never give it a try? (Burniske, 2007, p. 212)

As we can see, technology has many sides to it. A final aspect to consider in
relation to technology is the possibility of discrimination. There will be students, most
likely, in every class who are unfamiliar with the tools you choose to use. Some students
will feel left out because they do not have a computer at their home. If assignments are
given that require this technology, these students are further ostracized. Without
intending to, a teacher could easily put a student or students on the outside of the group.
We must remember that while computers and technology can help us differentiate
instruction and teach to individual students, not all students are equal at home. Every student will have a different home life. The requirements of our classroom should never place a student in the uncomfortable position of being without. By being aware and keeping the technology in the room, not outside of it, we can protect and include all of our students.

The question is no longer how to use technology to do the same thing better. Now the question is how to use technology to change practice to reach new goals— as a catalyst for change and as a tool in creating, implementing, managing, and communicating a new conception of teaching and learning and a system that supports it. (David, 1994, par. 7)

Is this tool a catalyst for change? If so, is it a change that would improve our education system? This is the question that schools are faced with today.

The first step that educators must take if they are interested in integrating technology into their classes is technology education. The instructors themselves must thoroughly understand how to use the equipment and resources that they wish to implement in their classrooms. “There is more to computers in the classroom than physically having them there; teachers must know how to use them and teach with them effectively,” says Morris (2000, p. 4).

In thinking about the use of the Internet in the classroom, teachers must first decide how they will use this new resource. “It has been repeatedly found that careful planning is a prerequisite for the effective implementation of technology and telecommunications in education and training” (Cradle, 1996, par. 2). Information, communication, and networking are just a few of the resources that the Internet affords.
Educators must decide exactly how they will implement this information, or else their classes will gain nothing. The Internet is just one of the many sources of information available to students. Important data and ideas are still present in textbooks, journals, or through the instructor. Nelson (2008) warns educators about possible negative aspects of technology use.

Disturbing trends about finding information and doing research are developing in students. The top three are (1) students believing that anything from a computer is better than anything that comes from a book, (2) students viewing the library as a last resort, and (3) students being concerned more with the quantity than the quality of their sources. (p. 80)

**VIX. Conclusions**

*Journal Entry*

10/9/07

I think that I would like to look at the influence of technology in the classroom in greater detail. I am obviously in the classroom that encourages that kind of research. I think that many forms of technology can be used successfully in the classroom to enhance student engagement and effectively teach lessons that have previously been restricted to books, pencils, and paper. The literature and writing will still, always, be the focus of the class, but these other materials and tools may give us new ways to teach important lessons.

Technology such as laptops enables teachers to provide more opportunities for students of all ability levels. These opportunities often involve the use of specific
software such as Garage Band or Comic Life, or other media tools such as digital still or video cameras. A fun class needn’t involve a guest speaker or a trip out of the classroom. With these resources available, classes can explore a museum online:

http://www.annefrank.org/content.asp?pid=1&lid=2

Watch live interviews:

http://college.usc.edu/vhi/otv/otv.php

Or even watch video clips:

http://www.history.com/media.do

All of these resources are a great way liven up all of your classes without taking extra time or money to do so. With all of these possibilities at your fingertips, opportunities will never need to be limited to one class or one group of students.

During the course of my Inquiry, I considered how students viewed our class activities. What did students find useful? What did they learn from? What activities or assignments were “fun” to them? In order to get the answers to these questions, I surveyed a class of eighth grade students. In order to encourage students to take their time and answer my questions thoroughly, I posted the survey as a journal on SCoodle. This format ensured that only the student and I would view the answers. In addition, students could answer from school or home and would not be rushed to complete their response. This is the question that I posted on the SCoodle journal:

SCoodle Post

Take a minute to think about the activities that we do in English class – reading out loud, reading individually, discussing what we read as a class, discussing readings on SCoodle forums, writing in SCoodle journals, watching movies & film clips, writing papers,
watching brain pop clips, using online resources, and reading choice novels – what do you think about these activities?

I want to know what activities you LIKE best in class.

Then, think again, tell me what activities you feel that you LEARN the most from. What activities make you think? (For example, you might have really enjoyed watching The Truman Show, but did you learn a lot from it or did you learn a lot from talking about it and writing the paper? Remember: there aren’t any wrong answers)

I’m interesting in hearing your opinions so don’t hold back! Let me know what you honestly thinking – don’t worry; I’m not going to hold it against you!

This question was designed to be as open-ended as possible. By listing some activities, I hoped to spark students’ memories and really encourage them to think about all of the activities that we did in class. After that, the answers were up to the students. This journal was not being graded so there was no retaliation for “wrong” answers. No students other than the writer would be able to read the responses, so there was no peer pressure to give a certain response. In end, the feedback was widely varied and often unique to an individual. As I read the responses, I found that my students did enjoy using technology in the classroom. The answers did vary, as did the individual opinions on different assignments and projects. While students reacted negatively to some projects on an individual basis, the classes responded positively to the use of technology in general. My classes enjoyed tackling new high-tech projects and working with new tools and
software, and the end products reflects the students’ high level of interest and hard work on the assignments.

As I look at my experience with technology in the classroom, I see a great many benefits. My classes have enjoyed working with many new and different tools throughout the year. I have received many impressive and insightful projects, papers, and responses. Boys and girls have reacted positively to the activities that we complete in class and have thrived in this environment. When problems arise, I am able to solve them without eliminating the technology. Using technology in the classroom has allowed me to engage and challenge my students; really get them thinking, trying, and working hard. I have found that laptops, Internet resources, film, music, and other media tools can be an incredibly effective way to promote student engagement in the English classroom.


