Special Double Issue:
"The Others" and
Student contest Winners

ELA in the 21st Century Digital Dialogues:
No App For That

by Philippe Ernewein

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"In writing the history of the early reading brain, I was surprised to realize that questions raised more than two millennia ago by Socrates about literacy address many concerns of the early twenty-first century. I came to see that Socrates' worries about the transition from an oral culture to a literate one and the risks it posed, especially for young people, mirrored my own concerns about the immersion of our children into the digital world. Like the ancient Greeks we are embarked on a powerfully important transition - in our case from a written culture to one that is more digital and visual" (70).

-*Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* by Maryanne Wolf

While I share some of Maryanne Wolf's concern, I also find daily examples in middle school and high school classrooms of how this immersion of our students into a more digital and visual world is creating unprecedented learning opportunities and new ways for students to demonstrate what they have learned. And often, these avenues are loaded with text and navigated through critical thinking.

Although I find great promise for innovation and creativity in these increasingly literacy-rich digital environments, there is one component that deserves more attention and focus than others: collaboration and dialogue. The practice of new forms of collaboration and dialogue can dramatically leverage the technological tools and advance the teaching and learning in our classrooms.

The New Dialogues: A Glimpse Into What is Possible

I recently observed an example of this transition into a more digital world during a visit to a high school classroom where a student was reading Shakespeare's *Richard II* on a digital device, with a notebook and teacher-assigned text nearby. The student's digital device screen, an iPad, was decorated with highlighted words and notes in the shape of thought bubbles. With the touch of the screen, the student could post a comment on the classroom blog where the teacher had posed a series of essential questions related to the big ideas of the unit.

After talking with the teacher I learned that the time dedicated to this blog posting activity varies, but typically occurs after a mini-lesson and guided practice. The activity frequently produces over one hundred comments from students responding to the teacher-posed question, as well as responses to what other students wrote. This flurry of digital activity often takes place during the last ten to fifteen minutes of class, when the brain is primed for higher-ordered processing and capturing deeper understandings.

The teacher requires the students to respond in a paragraph form to the question she posed and that they comment on two other students' posts; as I have now repeatedly observed, the students consistently exceed this requirement.

After talking with students about this digital dimension to their discussion, the prevalent attitude was positive. They never saw the discussion on the screen as taking the place of the classroom exchange of ideas, but rather as an augmenting force to their traditional, face-to-face, seminar discussions. The teacher agreed, "After a blog activity, the students have processed the topics and themes, reading what other students in class are thinking; as a result the discussions we have during seminar time are really rich and meaningful."

One student I spoke with, who frequently has great difficulty starting to compose essays, told me he uses the blog as a type of idea bank. "Kind of like a starter kit," he said, "I find something I agree with or disagree with and then take it from there."

Reflections on Teacher's Role: Collaborative Opportunities

Maryanne Wolf's and Socrates' worries were on my mind as I helped facilitate a student focus group on technology. The mixed group of middle and high school students was asked a series of questions prior to the discussion: How are you currently using technology to help your learning? How might technology sometimes hinder your learning? What could our school be doing to better incorporate technology into teaching and learning?

The answers were mostly predictable. They used digital devices, smart phones, laptops and iPads to research, send homework to their teachers, plan and compose writing. Many students mentioned how they are using technology

to help them to stay organized by accessing teacher web pages, creating files for each class and setting alerts and reminders for assignments.

They also honestly reflected on the potential pitfalls: taking shortcuts to learning formulas, the ease of plagiarizing by cutting and pasting and distractibility.

The role of teachers became abundantly clear by what was completely absent from the discussion with the students: the opportunity to collaborate. One teacher in the focus group even asked the student directly about collaborative opportunities, but none of the students listed specific ways of how they might be collaborating on-line or with digital media in an effort to support their learning.

This response (or lack thereof) made me think of the assumptions I've made about the frequently labeled digital natives. Are they really natives? Can anyone be native to a place that is virtual and so rapidly evolving? Being native implies familiarity and having a deep history, a strong relationship with a physical space. It was not until the conclusion of the focus group that I realized the error and complications of the term digital native. The label gives the students a certain sense of expertise and experience about the digital world that they do not necessarily have. For me, this led to the false mindset that this millennial generation has known nothing but computers in classrooms and digital media so therefore they would know best how to use it.

A more accurate term for all of us might be digital immigrants in this Google universe. All of us moving, migrating and exploring new territory as it evolves and becomes available. Our collective wisdom as educators should not be discounted. The strategies that create success for students in our classrooms can also have currency and value in the digital realm. What can think/pair/share look like when anchored in a blog or Tweet?

How can technology help create collaborative opportunities for students where there were limited or none before? What can a meaningful exchange look like on-line that contributes to the processing and understanding for our students on important content and skills?

Examples of collaborative learning projects:
- Model of a flipped classroom: popularized by the Kahn Academy (www.khanacademy.org), where concepts are taught through video that students watch as homework (outside of classroom time) so individual classroom time can be maximized for guided practice, answering questions and small group work. This format can also allow for individual students or groups of
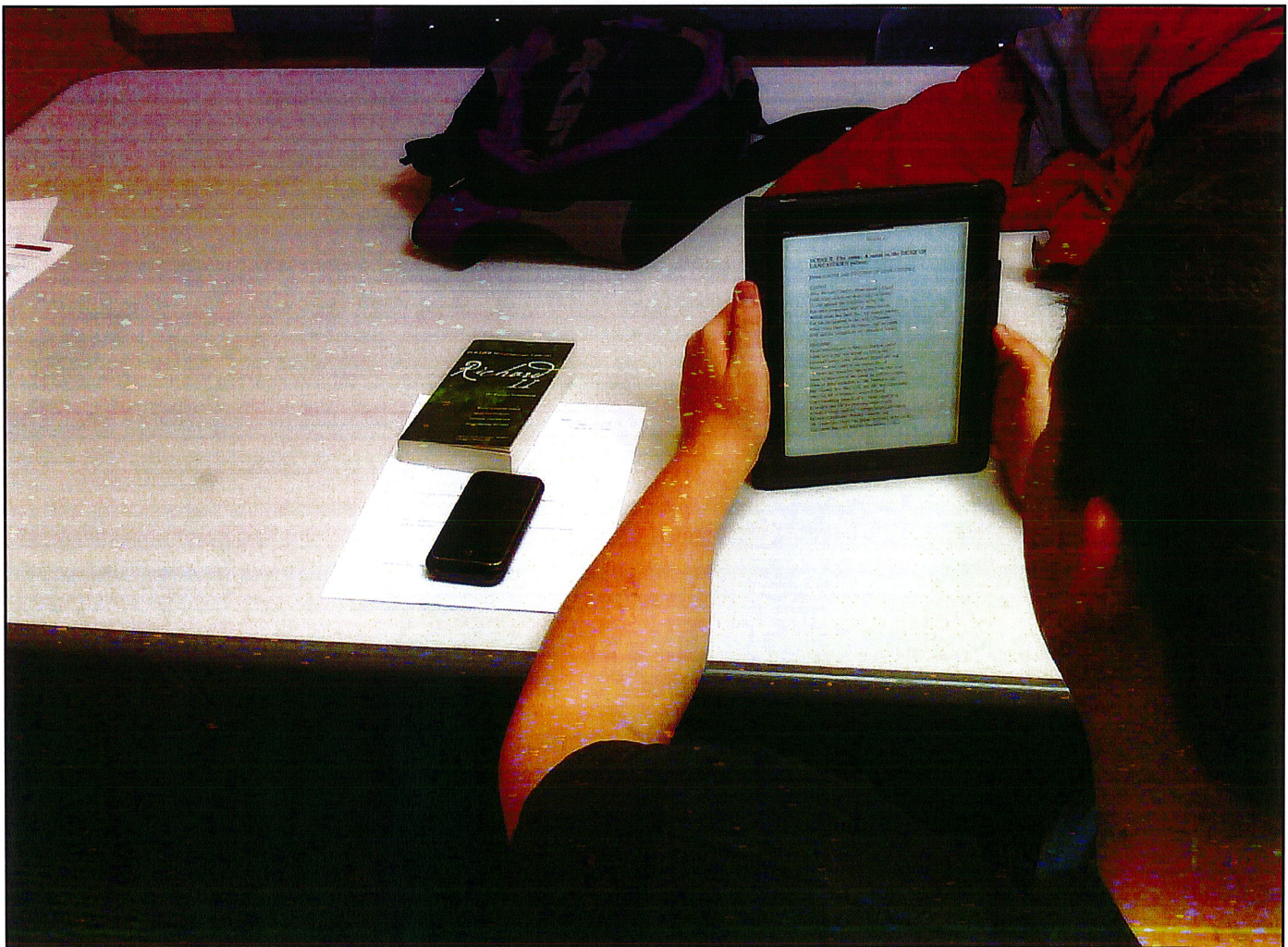
students to become experts in specific content areas and supporting the learning of their classmates.

- Creating opportunities for student group projects to work on videos, podcasts and websites in conjunction with related writing assignments. While working on prioritized content objectives, students also practice and development of collaboration, problem-solving and communication skills.
- Google Docs or other forms of cloud computing that create a digital space for students (and teachers) to work collaboratively on writing assignments in both asynchronous and synchronous settings.

This brings me back to Socrates and his worries about the move from oral to written language. Part of his worry was the potential loss of deeper understanding, the ability to remember and recall information. He was worried about what might be lost when words were written down, just as we are contemplating about what our student might lose as they become immersed in the digital world.

I'd like to pose the question, what can our students gain from this immersion? And more specifically, what role can teachers play to maximize the positive learning opportunities that this digital immersion presents?

Socrates valued and actively participated in dialogue with his students; from this, thanks to his student and scribe Plato, we have written versions of the spoken dialogues, considered by many to be among the most important historical dialogues. When I observe the ways students read postings on the screen and quickly click the reply button to respond to the text, video or song they just experienced, I am reminded of the generative process that Socrates valued in the dialogues. With all apologies to Socrates, let's call what the students are participating in today "digital dialogues." Our role as teachers then is to create the digital venue where these conversations can take place and then, even more critically, to facilitate the space in our classrooms for further processing and direction of those discussions and dialogues.

In a computer lab last week, I witnessed a truly extraordinary scene. Reading published criticism about their classroom novel on a teacher-directed website, one student called out to this group, "Come here and look what this guy wrote. I don't agree with that at all; I got to let him know." Noting the web address, the other students returned to their computers and actively participated in the digital dialogue.

Socrates believed that written speech was a "dead discourse"; and it was oral speech that was alive and moved individuals toward deeply and mindfully examining life and asking questions about the true nature of things, ideas and beauty.

This is where there is opportunity with digital media, to create a place for active, meaningful dialogue to return. A place to allow time for processing and digesting the massive amounts of media we are confronted with everyday.

I am not suggesting that dialogues with YouTube videos or news blogs replace the dialogues of Plato. However, I do believe that when rich and meaningful dialogue is generated in the digital world and used in tandem with more traditional, seminar-type classroom discussions, we are moving closer to the quality learning experience that Socrates hoped for with each of his students.

Just as wisdom or experiences cannot be downloaded, there is no "app" for managing digital dialogues in our classrooms. I do hope that the following questions can help move us toward a place where we can find more balance teaching and learning in an increasingly digital world:

1. How can digital dialogues support my learning objectives?
2. How can technology help me differentiate learning opportunities for my students?
3. How am I modeling for my students that I am continually learning?
4. Does my digital presence support student learning?
5. How am I balancing "high tech" and "high touch" in my classroom?

Works Cited

Wolf, Maryanne (2007). *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain.* New York: HarperCollins.