



# the WORD

NEWSLETTER FROM WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM (WAC) PROGRAM

## SPECIAL ISSUE: USING TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT WRITING PEDAGOGY AND STUDENT Technology in Writing Pedagogy?

By: Hallie Scott

Tweeting, texting, and composing great essays? Instructors might view digital technology as a threat to academic writing, but a slew of new software and web-based applications can actually help your students improve their writing while saving you time. In this issue, we highlight how digital technology can support several components of the writing process and writing instruction.



## Digital Technology and Writing Instruction: Why Bother?

By: Kevin Moran

The growth of digital technology over the past two decades is perhaps the most dramatic development in communications since the advent of the printing press. Institutions of higher education are some of the most important consumers and supporters of the new digital technologies – across disciplines they have revolutionized how the academy writes, researches, and publishes. However, most faculty approach digital technology more as individual consumers rather than instructors. For the most part the new capacities conferred by electronic means have not impacted on teaching methods – our task in creating this workshop was to familiarize faculty members with some of the digital tools available to aid in writing instruction.

### The Digital Revolution

Instructors face a reality where most of their students are “digital natives” – those who have spent their entire lives in interaction with computers, videogames, digital music players, smart phones, tablets etc. Although older cohorts, “digital immigrants”, are frequently skeptical of younger generation’s embrace of digital technology - communication technology has greatly increased the amount literate youth write (emails, instant messaging, texts, tweets). The challenge for instructors is to create learning environments that tap into this prodigious increase in digital writing practice outside the classroom – or face the risk of becoming increasingly distant in their teaching and thinking from those for whom a life fully integrated with digital devices is the norm.

### Digital Technology and Writing Instruction

But more specifically, how can digital technologies contribute to writing instruction? A review of the literature on this subject revealed four areas:

- Pre-writing or Invention
- Real world writing activities
- Collaborative Writing
- Formative Assessment

#### *Pre-writing or Invention*

Several studies have shown that the use of computer-based outlining improves student writing output. Digital software allows for considerable expansion beyond the more traditional blank page: students have a clear visualization of the global text structure; can expand their outlines a lot; can easily adapt the outline and the text.

#### *Real world writing activities*

Forms of online writing such as chats, forums, wikis, and blogs provide an authentic writing environment in that they provide a real audience and purpose for writing to students. Writing for an audience (even if it is only other classmates) via an online medium invites students to consider writing as a means of communication with a purpose rather than a self-contained text created for assessment purposes. Online writing also allows for easy peer feedback, as well as input from instructors.

#### *Collaborative Writing*

Quality learning environments include opportunities for students to engage in interactive and collaborative activities with their peers; such environments have been shown to contribute to better learning outcomes. Moreover collaborative writing tasks better reflect writing practices in the workplace – thus preparing students for post-university life. Digital technology facilitates student collaborative work by allowing far greater flexibility in terms of space and time than traditional face-to-face interactions.

#### *Formative Assessment*

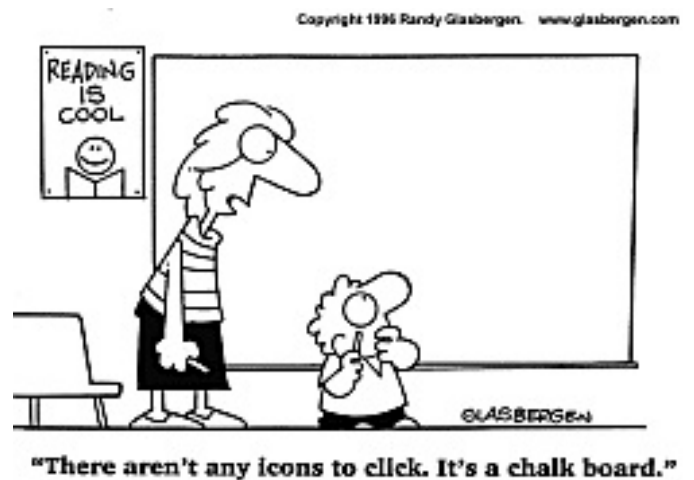
Educational research has long recognized the benefits of formative assessment: providing regular and multiple forms of feedback to students helps student identify their strengths and weaknesses as well problems areas for instructor support. This is assessment ‘for learning’ not ‘of learning’ as practiced in the traditional educational environment. Instructors can use digital technology to provide formative assessment.

### Digital Technology and Good Writing Pedagogy

The use of digital technology in writing instruction has been shown to have positive impact on student learning outcomes, in some of the areas and for some of the reasons discussed above. However, digital technology is not a panacea for student writing. As with any instructional tools, the use of digital technology must be guided by sound writing pedagogy. Online writing assignments, blogs, wikis, forums for example, must be first structured, and second, integrated into a course’s curriculum - not simply assigned in conclusion of the learning process. Suggestions for this are to:

- Break down assignments into tasks with short-term deadlines
- Provide students with incentives to participate in various areas of the digital task
- Use digital technology to supplement, not substitute, traditional face-to-face educational interactions.

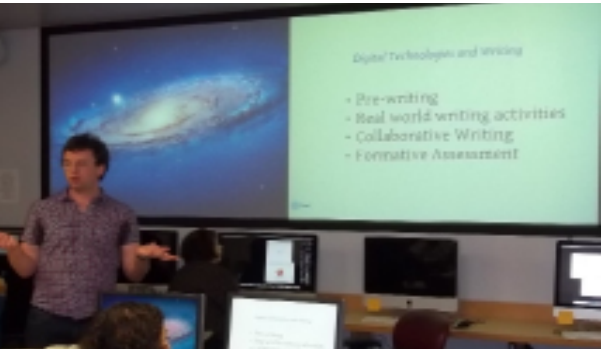
A familiarity with and use of digital technology learning aids can significantly improve the quality of individual writing instruction. Furthermore, it is imperative for faculty, and higher education as a whole, to adapt to the technological sea change occurring beyond its doors. Our workshop is a first step for some, a next step for others, to embracing the possibilities of the brave new world that is the digital age.



WAC Fellows Launch a CETL Workshop on Technology and Writing Instruction

By: Nazik Dinçtopal-Deniz, Annabel D’Souza, Hilal Erkovan, Kevin Moran, Hallie Scott, Debby (Chih-Huei) Su

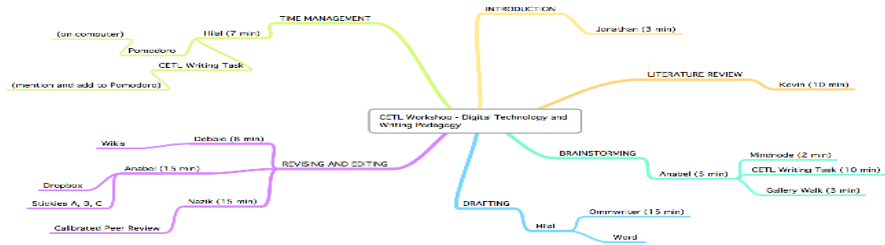
While most faculty members have given up their typewriters by now, embracing the next level of technology to support student writing can continue to be challenging and frustrating. In particular, how can faculty sort through and select the most appropriate tools from the plethora of available technologies to support students in the writing process? Here, we present specific software to exemplify how technology can be used to support several components of the writing process including: time management/productivity, brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising, feedback, peer review and collaborative writing.



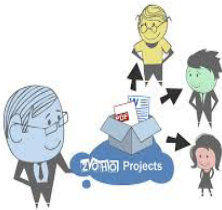
**Productivity:** Strong time management skills are critical to increasing productivity but challenging to convey to students. *Pomodoro* is a software that helps users stay on task by allotting a specific amount of time for particular tasks. Users begin by creating their activity list for the day and selecting the amount of time they

believe each task will take. The program’s audible timer is used to help users increase their awareness of time on task. Users can also analyze their productivity through reports generated by the application. Its features are intuitive and part of the program’s design. Pomodoro can be used for tasks other than writing. **Free.** Available at: <http://code.google.com/p/mypomodoro>. To learn about the ‘Pomodoro Technique’, visit <http://pomodoratechnique.com>

**Brainstorming:** Generating ideas about what to write can sometimes be the most difficult part of the writing process. Mind mapping, a strategy for visualizing thought branching, is an organic and intuitive alternative to traditional outlining. *Mindnode* is an application that allows the user to create colorful mind maps for essays, articles or projects on white space, allowing ideas to flow freely. Mindnode is easy to use and highly intuitive. It is MacOS friendly. Other options are *Simplemind* for OS and PC. **Both are free for most features.** Available at: <http://mindnode.com> and <http://www.simpleapps.eu/simplemind>



**Drafting:** There are some writers (students and faculty included) that feel stymied by Microsoft Word’s blank white pages and endless formatting options. Others get stuck obsessively editing each line instead of letting the writing flow. *Ommwriter* is an application that users can utilize to reduce anxiety and focus on writing without all the distracting features associated with other writing softwares. The program has minimal formatting boxes, uses white or soft-color space and has calming tunes to get you writing in your most zen-like state. Just don’t levitate as you write. **Free for most features.** Available at: <http://www.ommwriter.com>



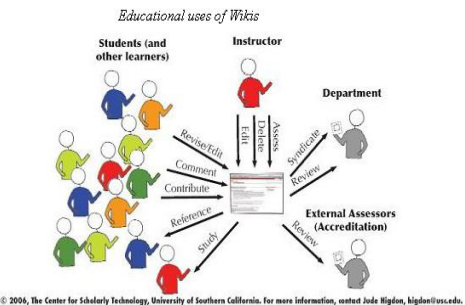
**Editing, revising, feedback:** Most of us already use Cloud applications to back up our own documents; why not use them for student papers? File hosting cloud applications such as *Dropbox* can be a time-efficient way to collect student papers and provide feedback. Files are time-stamped

letting you know when students upload them. The desktop application allows faculty to directly open up files in Microsoft Word and use the Review tool to add comments or mark changes. The assignment can then be resaved directly into the student-instructor shared folder. Dropbox is also a great tool as an online storage system for student papers. No more misplaced or lost papers and no more crowded and disorganized email inbox (at least not from student assignments!) **Free.** Available at: <https://www.dropbox.com>

**Peer review:** Through peer revision students can learn content and improve their own reading and writing skills. *Calibrated Peer Review* (CPR) is a web-based tool which makes the arrangement of peer revision and feedback provision efficient and time saving. In CPR, students receive training on peer revision via calibration submissions and anonymously evaluate their peers’ essays when they pass the training. The instructor designs the assignment, grading guidelines and calibration submissions. Assessing student writing is done by peers. CPR allows instructors to spend their time effectively on teaching and adjudicating the few submissions that require more advanced expertise. Isn’t it a much more rewarding and effective use of time? **Free for most features.** To register and set up an account, email: Dr. Wenying Huang-Stolte (Administrator), at [wyh@york.cuny.edu](mailto:wyh@york.cuny.edu). For more information about CPR and sample assignments, visit <http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/Home.aspx>.



**Collaborative writing:** They say the best type of learning is learning with others. *Wikis* are online tools that can be used for collaborative writing assignments. Wikis work as an online sketch pad for students to collaborate with their group members via Internet without physical constraints in terms of meeting time and location. Wikis keep track of the history of a document as it is revised. This can help instructors evaluate the individual student contributions quantitatively and qualitatively on a collaborative writing assignment. More information about Wikis can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnL00TdmLY>. For an example of how Wikis can be incorporated into collaborative assignments, visit: <http://bookbuddyreviews.pbworks.com/w/page/11666746/FrontPage>



We presented these ideas at a CETL workshop titled, *Using Technology to Support Writing Pedagogy and Student Writing*, on October 31st. The workshop was hands-on throughout and the participants had the opportunity to experience each application personally. Below are some comments we received from faculty members regarding the impact of the workshop on their classroom:

“... While I have used Dropbox, I never used it in my teaching. ...with Dropbox, I can see how students can share their work and I also like the CPR because in addition to them doing the reviews, they also have some training in how to write up a good review. I think taking my peer review into a technological mode facilitated by the CPR, Dropbox, and/or Blackboard peer review that was mentioned is something I will definitely be looking into and incorporating into my writing intensive class!”

“... I had struggle with how to present the information to my students in a way that was engaging for them. Hopefully, Prezi will help with that. We often do group sessions and our last paper is a team written paper. I will invite many of them to dropbox.com to collaborate on their papers from afar. I have already begun to use Pomodoro technique and I have recommended it to several students who have stated they struggle with organization. Last, I have recommended Ommwriter to a student with ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] and others who state they are distracted or struggle with the writing process... Thank you for such useful and relevant ways to incorporate technology in my professional life.”

We believe that the workshop was successful in helping faculty identify appropriate and useful tools to help their students improve their writing skills. For many, we believe, this workshop helped ease some of the frustration, confusion and challenges in embracing technology in their classroom. If you missed it, you can still learn about the workshop and the specific applications by visiting the WAC website.