

Connections, Reflections, and Technological Inventions: Putting it All Together

by Emily C. Holmes Turner

Teaching is all about learning. As educators, we learn in many ways – formalized education, while preparing lessons, through professional development, and “on our feet” in the classroom when we change things from day to day, hour to hour, and even moment to moment to meet our students’ needs. We learn from our students. We learn from each other. We learn constantly. In my Masters of Education program, all of these modes of learning have been enriched and enhanced. There are various facets to my learning throughout my Masters, but the four main threads have been technology, connections, student motivation, and reflection on my own teaching practice.

Using technology has been the commonality. Technology has helped me to learn within the Masters program, and has helped me to connect better with students individually and to make vital connections between motivation, learning styles and needs, and instruction. In my CEP 800 course, Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings, I used various technologies. While conducting student interviews and reviewing them for my podcast, I learned that though students may be able to correctly define a concept, they may not have the deeper understanding needed to apply it to real life. The student I interviewed rattled off, quite succinctly, a solid definition of justice. When I asked more focused questions, I realized that his understanding of justice was quite one-sided; he saw justice more as a relationship between actions and outsiders wielding consequence, but had trouble extending the definition of justice to more natural cause and effect patterns. Asking these more focused questions helped me to better understand the depth of my student’s understanding of justice, and to reflect on ways to address these gaps for enriched and engaging learning.

I used audio technology during my poetry unit, allowing students record themselves performing their own poetry aloud, and to publish a compilation CD for them to keep. It also worked with other units – students recorded presentations of their research to post to a class blog that others could access and respond to. This was a dynamic and interesting way to get them discussing points with each other!

The readings and discussions in this course and others like it, paired with my work on the podcast and video projects, led me to think more about ways I can change the way students in my classes interact with information, literature, me, and each other to learn more dynamically and deeply. I have always tried to make what we are learning connect to the “real world”, but having students meet a challenge

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

while doing this is a great idea. By implementing these projects and challenging students to create something that both deepens and proves their understanding challenges the “traditional” way of doing things. When looking at the concept of justice, for example, I knew that I could challenge students to come up with proposals to make different facets of our school more just – anything from the attendance policy to who gets nominated and elected to homecoming court.

As a result of my learning in TE 847, Advanced Methods for Teaching Language Arts, I set up and facilitated a discussion forum for my English classes. My original plan was to use Edublogs, but after investigating the resources we had at school, the discussion forum was linked to our high school’s website, and could be accessed from school or home (for those who had home internet access). This approach also incorporated students in our Web Design classes; I met with them and told them what I wanted to do, and they were able to develop the discussion forum and customize it somewhat.

This discussion forum was meant to enrich students’ reading and discussion of literature they had chosen for their independent semester reading project. The students were required to read two books (this semester, one autobiography and one classic) from a list I’d generated, and create a reading response journal. I posted discussion questions relating to the shared themes in these books for students to respond to. This was to help them to dialogue with each other about literature and ask questions, and helped me to monitor their progress with their reading.

My hope was that using this type of technology would allow students to better explore others’ ideas and investigate/respond to multiple interpretations of literature. I also hoped that some students that held back or often went unheard in traditional classroom discussions would find a voice using the online format. They did.

I chose to implement this lesson in my 2nd and 7th hours, which are 9th grade Honors English classes. The students are overall very motivated and possess many skills for reading, interpreting and discussing literature, yet often on a superficial level. Some students tend to dominate classroom discussions, and others struggle to find their voice – either because they are soft spoken or because they need more time to formulate their responses than the traditional class period allows.

At the beginning of this lesson, I planned a class session in the library for each class for the sole purpose of introducing students to the online discussion forum. I used the data projector and teacher computer to show the class how to access the site, log in, read discussion prompts, post responses, read the responses of others, and reply to classmates. I had them respond to the prompt, “*How can online class discussions ensure that everyone’s ideas are heard?*” which I had posted earlier. Students were able to log in and practice responding and replying to others. It also got them thinking deeper about the

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

benefits of discussing issues this way. I passed out the project requirements as they practiced (1 initial post to each week's teacher-generated prompt, and 2 responses to others' posts per week).

I scheduled one day per week for these classes to visit the library to access the computers, since not all have internet access at home. They looked forward to these days! I also noticed that students continued their online discussions throughout the week, logging in at home or in the library before and after school. I heard them talk to each other about posts they had read – so the discussion continued, student-driven, in other ways as well.

I will definitely do this again. Students that I rarely hear from in the classroom made themselves heard often and poignantly in the online discussions. There were many times that threads developed between students that I have never seen talk to each other outside of cyberspace. My goals for the lesson (and the students, of course), were met solidly.

I was able to assess students' deepened understanding of the issues and themes of their chosen literature by the quality and depth of their responses to the online discussion forum. Students should also have developed an appreciation of what the online discussion forum can do to equalize discussions and help hear those who often remain unheard in the traditional classroom setting. I was also able to evaluate whether or not there is more equity in the quantity of student responses (Are more students participating in the online forum than in the classroom?). Technology played a significant role in these assessments because I was accessing the discussion forum to read student responses and check the amount of student participation and posts per student. Points were awarded each week for their participation in the forums, and I provided feedback both in the discussion forum and in the classroom about their progress.

I expected that students would participate because they are grade-conscious and motivated overall, and because they enjoy using technology. They were much more enthusiastic than I thought, and I found that many students who were behind in their reading tried harder to catch up so they could better participate in the discussions. I think some students who were painfully behind in reading were still able to benefit because they learned a lot about the books from reading others' posts and discussions online. What amazes me is that students are still asking for more – some have presented ideas for ways we could use the online discussions for other pieces of literature, and for our debate unit as well.

Some students did struggle and had questions about using the technology, but I was able to remediate instruction with these students, or other students quickly stepped in to teach their peers. Many of the questions about content that students had were posed in the discussion forum, and other

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

students were able to try to answer them. I did add some guiding questions once in a while to the threads, however, if I thought they could benefit from considering another point of view or were stuck on an issue.

I think this lesson helped students to make better sense of the content because they used the technology. They had to think deeper about their responses because they had to initially post to a focused question, and they had to write effectively to communicate. They also had to explain and defend their positions, causing them to think deeper again. It was engaging, attention-grabbing, and led them to think about things on a higher level.

Connections with students have been enriched because of the technology aspects that I've integrated due to my Masters courses and learning, but also due to the learning I've done about individual students and their backgrounds. This specifically happened in TE 891, Educating English Language Learners. I have a high number of immigrant students in my classes, mainly Somali, Hmong, Vietnamese and Cuban. As I read the articles and delved into the coursework and discussions in this class, I realized that I had come into this course looking for the reasons behind my frustration – frustration with the stunted views of some teachers and students, and frustration with how to best deal with it. Ironically, I began to realize that many (not all, of course) things that are happening in my school are actually pretty strong when it comes to educating our immigrant students. We have flags EVERYWHERE...and outside, along with the American flag, hang the flags of countries represented by many of our immigrant population. We have signs and posters in different languages (including many of the room signs for classrooms – commissioned by the teachers, done by students' hands). We have both two way bilingual education and opportunities for immigrant students to learn along with the general populace. I, too, see a wonderful and refreshing work ethic in my immigrant students – they are generally a joy to teach.

I do see many of those reasons for frustrations, though (or at least, after this course, I am better able to articulate them). Michigan's economy is suffering. This tends to breed resentment toward any group that can even be *perceived* to be "taking jobs" (just look at the voters' decision recently to repeal Affirmative Action!). Michigan has a large amount of migrant farm workers who depend on our crops of cherries, apples, peaches, strawberries, and the like (and we depend on the migrant workers, as well...), which might strengthen the belief that most Mexican immigrants are here illegally. With a large number of Somali students, the suspicious fear of anyone with a headscarf during these times of war still lingers in the corner of many minds. Even in my culturally diverse school, these beliefs live subversively on.

The wonderful thing is that, because of our diversity, there is so much opportunity for students (and teachers) to get to know those who can teach them reality. Yes, there are groups that stay steadfastly together as they walk down the hallway, but so many others identify students of other groups as

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

friends. They work collaboratively in the classroom together. With our International Baccalaureate Programme, there are more chances for conversation and curious questions to be asked and answered. We have an Asian Club, a Latino Club and a Model UN.

This course helped me to put a name to the things that I realize need improvement. The testing, and its dangers for the student (teaching to the test, not challenging ELL students in lieu of mastering tested skills), but also there are dangers for the schools – they may be sanctioned or penalized for low test scores when what they need is more money, training and resources for teachers (thank you NCLB!). Though I teach many immigrant students, I have never been trained how to best teach them for success...especially alongside native language speakers. Again, because of Michigan's economy, school budgets have been cut and we have had to constantly reassign our groups of laid off teachers instead of having the ability to hire new teachers with this training (or at least with bilingual language skills). We can't afford to hire new teachers or assistants for our BIC program, therefore we must depend on student aides to help us to communicate with our growing number of students who speak Farsi.

After taking this course and the others in my Masters program, I realize that one of the most important teacher characteristics that we can foster is, simply, "be knowledgeable." Of course we need to have content knowledge, but what about knowledge of our students' backgrounds and struggles? This also speaks to the question, "Is love and compassion enough?" Well...it is, if it inspires one to gain knowledge of how best to help a student to succeed. Do any of us teaching immigrant students (or teaching ANY student who will soon go out into a world influenced and occupied by other cultures) have the needed training in order to take love and compassion to its logical, helpful end? I know I could use a lot more.

Connecting with and motivating students is the "big idea" that struck me hardest in other courses as well. In CEP 883, Psychology of Classroom Discipline, the thread of motivating students and how motivation clearly ties in with classroom management was prevalent. The individual student case studies, in conjunction with the other course reading and discussions, made me rethink my ideas about what learning really looks like, and connect with reasons why some "kinds" of students struggle more than others in my classes. I taught both 9th grade honors English and 9th grade general English when I took this course, and that year I had the worst time with management that I ever had. I had a LOT of "social promotions" – students that hadn't been successful in middle school, but were promoted to high school because they were 16 – and motivation was low because they hadn't felt successful in a classroom for a long time. The discussions we had about goals of mastery versus goals of performance really got me thinking about these students. Obviously, the classroom "norms" have not motivated these kids, and many of them have internalized the idea that they are "dumb", so performance goals are not going to get them working. Getting these students to share what they feel they ARE good at has

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

helped me to inspire goals of mastery; if I can propose assignments, writing prompts, and projects about things they feel confident about, they are more apt to positively engage in both the work and the classroom environment.

Brushing up on the Multiple Intelligences in the Jones & Jones text was extremely thought-provoking. I realized that I offer many options for projects and assessments in my honors class, but not as much in my “general” classes. This doesn’t make sense, because the vast majority of my honors kids are there because they are motivated by performance goals, and have learned how to “do” school. They SHOULD have options, but so should by other students! Duh! I guess I’ve been afraid to offer too much because I thought it would create chaos, but now I realize that I have to help them to learn using their individual learning styles and intelligences, and that will help to *hinder* chaos. The TARGET goals discussed in this course are a great way for me to think about management, too; planning learning opportunities that encourage students to solve real life problems creates connections and relevance, and more explicitly explains the reason and goals behind the tasks and assignments. This is especially exciting because I write units for the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme which is inquiry-based – a wonderful opportunity to make those connections to the wider community.

Our group discussions were centered a lot around the hesitancy of teachers to change their ways of doing things, and I realized that I have a “way in” at school. We have been working on rubrics for dealing with aggressive behaviors, and sharing some of these ideas could help us to start discussing more openly best practices of classroom management. Coupled with our IB programme, this could be the beginning of some real school reform. I realize that we’re not just discussing individual classroom activities that make good learners, but how to inspire students to be compassionate and active in the community.

Another facet of connection is creating positive peer relationships. I am fortunate that teacher/student rapport is something that I can naturally build; perhaps it comes from my open personality, my drama background, the fact that I struggled as a middle and high school student...maybe all of it. I talk with parents well, and am able to diffuse tense situations. I would like to see more parents actively involved in their children’s successful education, and the chapter on building parent/teacher relationships gets at the idea that school should be *part* of the community, not something separated from it.

Helping to build good peer relationships is something we don’t think about or talk about enough in high school, though. We deal with the fights and the arguments and the “drama”; we have peer mediation and anger management and Assistant Principals who suspend those who create problems. All of these are targeted at dealing with kids who already have or are causing problems, and we don’t really do anything specific to make sure that students are connecting to each other in a positive way before issues

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

come to our attention.

We have been talking in my school about changing the “culture of clash” – the negativity that we hear in the classrooms, in the hallways, from parents, and from students. That year at my school was a rough one. We were attending in-services and creating rubrics about how to handle aggressive behavior. My work in this course made me realize that we really need to talk about ways to strengthen the bonds between our students as well, and that this will really help to change that culture of negativity to one of positivity. I am in charge of our freshman orientation, which I run using the Link Crew program that “links” groups of incoming 9th graders with juniors and seniors that have been trained to do these types of activities with the freshmen. This works incredibly well for orientation, because the kids then know upperclassmen and quite a few of their fellow classmates by the time they walk in on the first “real” day of school. I have now extended the program throughout the year, getting my Link Crew Leaders together with their freshmen groups multiple times during the school year to have fun and discuss issues. I’ve contacted an area non-profit that is going to send college students to help me to coordinate events over the course of the year.

As an English teacher, I have since integrated many pieces of literature that provide great “teaching moments” geared toward emotional intelligence – *The Scarlet Ibis*, for example (If you haven’t read it, I highly urge you to do so...James Hurst...great stuff), or just about anything by Amy Hempel (*The Harvest* comes to mind, or *The Man in Bogota*...again must-reads!).

TE 846, Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners, enhanced many of the concepts presented in other courses in my Masters program as well. As a high school teacher, I expect students to come to me with certain content knowledge. This doesn’t always happen, and it frustrates me every year. I have to be flexible; I have to custom-fit my instruction of subject matter to fit the needs of the students I have from year to year, class to class. I do this because I want them to know what I am teaching them, and I know they need to know it. I am also frustrated every year because I have expectations for students’ ability to follow directions and procedures as well, and they often don’t do this as I expect. Just as I want students to come to me with the scaffolded and fundamental subject knowledge that I can expect and build on, I want them to come to me with understanding of how to behave and work for success in a classroom. When my students seem to be falling short of my expectations and I feel the most frustrated, it is often because I did not take the time to explicitly teach my expectations! Duh! I will admit that I have spent so much time blaming teachers in my students’ pasts for not teaching them how to behave. I realize now that whether they did this or not, much of my students’ negative behavior is a result of the fact that I haven’t taught them *my* expectations.

Honors kids get it; they know how to “do school”. They learn quickly what a teacher wants and are able,

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

for the most part, to pick up on this and adjust themselves accordingly. That's putting a lot of pressure on them, when I could just be more up front about it in the first place. Not to mention my non-honors students! I have focused a lot on rules, but I now give the reasoning behind these rules. I especially focus on explaining and modeling expectations in these classes, and teaching procedures.

Reflection on my own teaching practice has been a constant throughout my MAED program – both formally and informally – but in TE 847, *Advanced Methods for Teaching Language Arts*, I was asked to reflect on my life OUTSIDE of school and therefore on my own writing practice. I decided to create poetry for this project because it is something that I've written occasionally throughout my teen and adult life, but incompletely and without real revision and dedicated attention. I've composed short poems scribbled down in response to fleeting thoughts or unexpected inspirations, but never really revisited or considered to be a work in progress. I wanted to challenge myself to create something more meaningful by completing the entire writing process – drafting, revising, editing and publishing.

The idea for *Bound* came from a card that I stumbled upon when cleaning out the attic. The picture on the front was a watercolor rendering of a child's hand grasping the index finger of an adult's – the card was from my mother; she had placed it on top of my clothing in the bag she packed before taking me to Rivendell, a psychiatric residence for troubled teens. I *was* troubled, but didn't belong in the midst of those with suicidal wishes and violent pasts. She was desperate. So was I. Seeing that image made me think deeply about the nature of the bond between my mother and I, and the fact that I railed so desperately against her love but always found solace in the knowledge that it was unwavering.

Two of the other poems were inspired by my separation, which was a little over a year ago when I took this course, and my then-recent divorce – and the remembrances and vexations before and after these brutal milestones. *Movement* is about my sons, and the bindings, I suppose, that are just beginning to be tested.

The revisions that I made, specifically to *Bound*, were inspired by reading it aloud to myself (I also audio recorded myself reading the poem and played it back), sharing it with friends and family (including my mother, whose relationship with me was the inspiration for this piece), and the feedback given to me through the peer group set up through this course.

The important criteria for writing in this genre were message, figurative language, and performance. My poetry is generally meant as spoken word, so the rhythm and oral interpretation was also integral. I learned that “good” writing in this genre has a message that is both personal and will connect with those who experience it; the verse should reflect an issue or experience that the author/performer wants heard. I tried to pay attention to the rhythm and balance of the text as well, since it is meant to

E. Holmes Turner
Synthesis Essay
MAED Capstone
July 2011

be spoken.

Writing in this genre will have an impact on how I teach poetry and the writing of poetry because it shows that poetry is about deep emotion and connection, and also has parallels with hip hop and other genres of song. Using figurative language to make comparisons and communicate with the audience is the root of poetry; finding ways to make the reader/listener comprehend the message through the senses, emotions, and personal experience is key. Using figurative language to “hook” the audience and communicate ideas and feelings is not only a skill useful in the writing and performing of poetry – it is an important element of compelling writing in other genres as well.

One of the most important elements of spoken word poetry in particular is its performance-based nature. Students will have to share their writing aloud with each other during the feedback and revising processes. This genre also may appeal to many students that have not had positive experiences with poetry or are hesitant about reading and writing it. Because there are parallels with music, specifically hip hop, students will hopefully open themselves up to poetry because of their love of music. Getting students to use figurative language to communicate ideas in poetry, rather than simple explanation, will be challenging. Asking many questions such as, “What might this remind people of?” or “What other occurrences make us feel this way?” can help them to use metaphor and simile to draw upon common experiences in order to help the audience better understand something very personal.

I learned that poetry is a wonderful way to discuss how sentence variation, figurative language, syntax, and word choice affect the power in writing. Simply put, the choices the author makes have to be just that – choices. Writing has the power to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of others. I think that many times, teachers (as well as students) view poetry as somehow separate from the other genres. Writing and revising my poetry has made me realize that poetry is an authentic and valuable tool for teaching about style, voice, and the other, more subtle nuances of creating powerful writing.

Writing in this genre has helped me to feel more comfortable with teaching its writing process, and appreciation for it as literature. I plan to write often and consistently with my students in the future, and am excited to do so. I can also pair writing poetry with use of technology for publication – students can create podcasts and/or videos as final products for presentation. The possibilities for connections in the classroom when it comes to content, teacher/student, and the building of community are powerful.