Tuning Your Pedagogical Practice: Incorporate Digital and Social Technology

Neelofer Qadir is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Follow her on Twitter @_neelofer and check out her website.
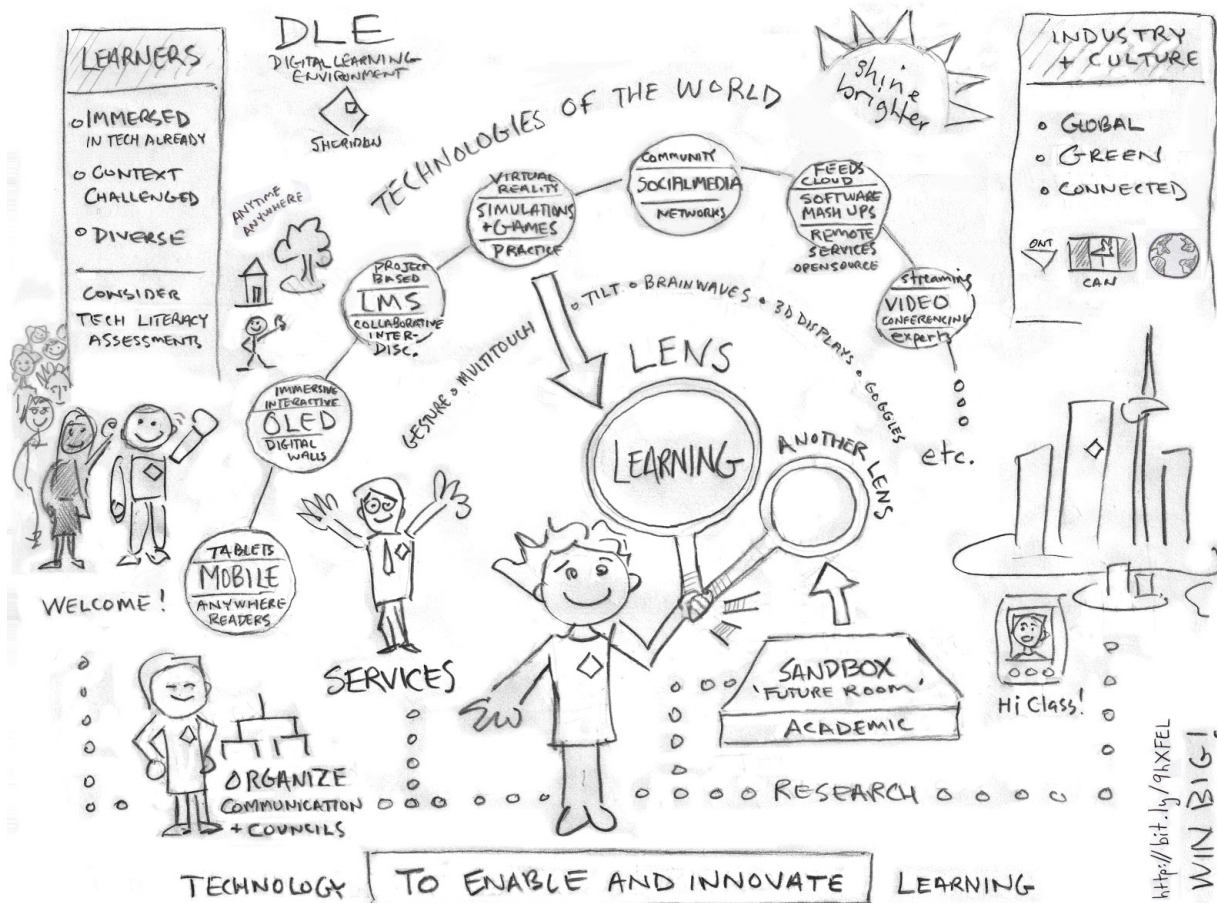
Teaching with digital and social technologies often produces stress and tension for teachers and students alike, but I suspect much of that comes from an unclear explanation of why a particular tool is being used and comfort, or lack thereof, with its use. Digital and social technologies are attractive in many ways and we can get excited about working with them, especially in this era where students are dubbed "digital natives." But these tools require we think about their purpose, method, and audience just as carefully as when we design an essay prompt, a problem set, or any other assessment exercise.

Today, I want to share how I have used digital and social media resources in my literature classroom as well as consider how I can – and others have – scaled them up to be a major course assignment. My foray into using these technologies came from a desire to disrupt the notion that I'm the only reader of my students' work. Because I teach about narrative – whether literary, visual, or journalistic – I want my classroom to be a space where students interact with

narrative across different technologies and develop skills in using such technology intentionally. I turned first to technologies I knew well and thought my students would, too. These were more social media platforms, such as Twitter and Tumblr.

In an online course on film and literature, I created a channel for student conversations through Twitter, inviting them to live-tweet their experience watching films. I can hear the naysayers already: that disrupts the viewing experience in an already heavily distracted world. I hear you and I disagree: students came to this class with a range of experience studying cinema and I needed them to take good notes on the films we watched, just as much as I expected them to underline/highlight, write marginal comments, and synthesize ideas from the short stories, graphic novels, and novellas they were reading. To take this a step further, I combined their tweets in Storify (prior to when Twitter launched the "Moments" feature) so students could see in a snapshot what their peers were saying. This laid the foundation for their discussion board conversations, from which they built up to the literary or film analysis papers. **This scaffolding is a critical feature of how I bundle digital and social technologies into my larger course design.**

[Note: I'm sorry to report Storify is canceling its service as of May 2018. It's an excellent tool and I'm hoping we see something similar offered by another service soon.]

Tumblr has been an excellent way for students to create digital archives of the critical keywords in two of my courses, Introduction to World Literature in English (face-to-face) and Later British Literature (online). I could share supplemental texts with students that emerged from current real world engagement with our course topics while teaching them how to synthesize a text, extend a conversation, and use hashtags to create a bibliographic management system. In each of the above courses, students combined the work they curated in this digital space with the core texts and analyzed them together in at least one short paper. They talked about how the public conversation on terms like 'migration' and 'ethnicity' morphed depending on the publication venue, geographical and/or historical context, and/or genre.

Another digital tool that I have used to a lesser extent is hypothes.is, which allows multiple users to annotate the web or PDFs. There's also a Chrome plugin for easy widespread integration. For my classes (mostly smaller ones, 15-20 students), this works best as a class-wide or small group tool. Exposing reading and notetaking as shared practices demystifies much of the learning process for students, and it makes very clear which ideas or passages are most generative or confusing for us to pick up during our conversations in the classroom.

In my case, using digital and social technologies has been another way to break the wall between myself and students, too. It allows me one more entry point into modeling critical reading and thinking skills as well as managing difficult conversations. I look forward to creating assignments that feature contemporary technologies and interact with publics outside our shared academic space. These include assignments like the Wikipedia Project, podcasting, and using GIS and other mapping tools to produce visuals of the literary texts we are reading.

As other GradHackers have written, there are numerous perks to incorporating technologies such as blogs, Twitter, Storify, and Google Docs into your courses. Both you and your students expand your digital literacies, learn new tools and skills that are valuable in a range of professions, and break the fourth wall of the classroom by engaging with multiple publics. As you turn to revise your syllabi for the beginning of a new semester, think about how you can incorporate one or more of these in the course you are teaching. And, check out Andrea Zellner's 7 Strategies to Make Your Online Teaching Better. Much of what Zellner offers is equally generative for those of us teaching in face to face and hybrid environments (I especially appreciate tips 1-3 and 7).

We want to hear from you! Share what you're up to in the comments or via @gradhacker social media channels.

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