

Infusing Technology in the English Classroom: One Teacher's Journey

BRENDAN PIETERS
Santa Fe Community College

I have been teaching English since I was a graduate student at the University of Florida in 1980, but I taught it in the normal, classic classroom—a blackboard, a desk, a podium, and rows of student desks. In the early 1990s, here at Santa Fe Community College (where I have taught since 1986), my teaching experiences began to mutate.

In the fall of 1992, my colleague Judy Rice, a computer instructor, a visionary, and the main force behind the creation of Open Campus (our Internet college), taught a semester-long workshop in *Asymetrix Multimedia Toolbook*, an authoring program. Although up to that point I had mostly used the computer for e-mail and word processing, the workshop looked like fun. It was. And during it I programmed my first *Toolbook* tutorial, called (rather grandiosely) “How To Read a Poem.” This tutorial (like the others linked to this article) contained a text with hot links—to the poem’s allusions, to its context, and to discussions of its keywords developed using the *Oxford English Dictionary*. When a teacher discusses literature, “hotwording” is what we do—we point to this, we ask questions about that, we illuminate the other thing. Doing it as literal hotwords in an actual tutorial is just making teaching publishable and reproducible, and it gives students access to what amounts to a discussion. It is also possible to ask for written responses in the tutorial and then give feedback on those responses. Hotwording provides individual attention to students as they explore poetry, novels, plays, and short stories, helping them discern important words and phrases and supplying the background necessary for more reflective analysis. At the Web site, <http://inst.santafe.cc.fl.us/~jpieters/1102.exe>, you will find a literature tutorial created to guide students through understanding and analysis, and at <http://inst.santafe.cc.fl.us/~jpieters/2301dl.exe> is a series of tutorials for Advanced Composition classes (for instructions, see the appendix).

TEACHER AND STUDENT REACTIONS

I quickly saw the usefulness of this tutorial in the classroom—as teachers, what we ordinarily do is to hotlink material. We bring in our outside knowledge; refer to articles or books, similar literature, or dictionaries both common and specialized. The tutorial contained hotlinked material that made it function as a freestanding version of the inside of the teacher’s brain.

At first, the infrastructure of the traditional classroom held me back. To show my students the tutorial and others that I soon built, I had to order a computer cart with a projection panel from our audio-visual people and project the tutorial from the computer onto a screen. To allow my students to use the tutorials on their home computers, I would package them onto a series of two or three floppy disks for the setup. (This was in 1993 and 1994, before the Internet was being widely used.)

Within a few years, our department created two computer classrooms—25-networked computers on tables, loaded with *MS-Word*, the *Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment*, and the Internet. I installed my tutorials on the networked computers and put them up also on the larger network—so my students could use them in class, at home, and in other networked labs around campus. (In addition, I was no longer completely wedded to packaging the tutorials on floppy disks once an Internet site was available from which students could download; but not everyone had Internet access then, and not everyone had CD drives, so the floppy disk setup method was slow to disappear.)

Life in the computer classrooms began in earnest in 1996. We used the tutorials in class—they were essentially keyed to the writing assignments, so students were eager for instructions and examples of what they were expected to turn in for major grades. Using them in class seemed to make students eager to use them at home as well.

The *Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment* (DIWE) was developed at the University of Texas in the 1980s, and I found (and still find) it useful in teaching writing for two main reasons:

1. Everything in DIWE takes place in the form of writing: mail messages, chat, and invent prompts (which are questions, a space to answer, and a button that provides the teacher’s explanation just when students are most interested, right after they have attempted their own answers). So students end up writing a great deal and reading a great deal in class. When the exams roll around, they are quite practiced in written responses to my questions and tend to do very well.

2. Letting the software do much of the information transfer frees up my class time to visit with students and talk about their writing.

The Journey Continues

In May 1997, I was teaching mainly in computer classrooms, using *Toolbook* tutorials and DIWE. The college had dabbled in distance learning, though in spring semester of 1997 all we really had was e-mail and no real infrastructure. I received a sabbatical and went to work for Automatic Data Processing (ADP, a payroll company), building computer-based training using *Toolbook*, training that was bundled for clients who purchased or leased ADP's payroll and human resources software. I received a vast and deep education in *Toolbook* from working with people in the online group who could literally get the *Toolbook* program to sit up and bark. When I came back to Santa Fe, I really knew how to program in *Toolbook*.

Judy Rice, my first *Toolbook* instructor, had by 1997 become the driving force behind Open Campus, and we developed courses for Internet delivery using *WebCT* and developed the infrastructure to support faculty in their training and to help students learn how to take courses through the Net.

In 2002, as we entered our 5th year of Open Campus, students can get an associate's degree at Santa Fe entirely through the Internet. Few students do, however; more typically, our Open Campus students take a combination of onsite and online courses, and the Open Campus allows people time to shift their "classroom" work around jobs and family. (For more information, see <http://www2.santafe.cc.fl.us/%7EOpenCampus/courses.htm>. Then click on the semester, Courses, scroll to English, and go to Advanced Composition—or take a look around the Open Campus information site.)

My Journey in Context

Plato had manifest and serious objections to the new technology of his day—writing. He thought that, if writing became widespread, people would both lose their oral memory and stop talking to one another. I think he was right about oral memory (where would I be without sticky notes and e-mails and voice mails to myself?), but not about talking. So when those who decry technology moan about how our society is no longer reading because of the computer, I think back to Plato, and I ask, just what do we do most of the time on the computer? Look at pretty pictures? No, read. And have we stopped talking to one another? Not by what I have observed.

So where do we go from here? Yesterday I read a letter of recommendation for tenuring an English Department colleague. The letter said that he was “technologically very savvy, but he could certainly also teach a class with a stick and some dirt to write in.” As also could many of us—teaching is teaching, and the Internet is a tool. As are networked classrooms, and interactive tutorials used in class or at home. Also so is a pencil—just a tool, a real technological advancement for its day, and a tool that Plato never truly approved of. He must be spinning in his grave now!

Contact Information:

Brendan Pieters
Santa Fe Community College
Gainesville, Florida USA
brendan.pieters@santafe.cc.fl.us

APPENDIX

Instructions for the Tutorials in My Advanced Composition Classes

Downloading The Tutorial

1. Create a TEMP folder off your root drive (usually the C drive). If you already have a TEMP folder, clear out any file named setup.exe that might already be there.
2. Open your Web browser, and go to the site.
3. When the SaveFile window appears, select the TEMP folder as the location to which the file will download. Do not rename the file! Click OK.
4. After the file has downloaded onto your hard drive, you will need to extract it to continue the installation. To do so, simply double-click on the file .exe in Windows Explorer.
5. You will then see the file Setup.exe in your TEMP folder.
6. To install the tutorial, simply double-click on Setup.exe. Choose the Full Install option when prompted. The installation is automatic at that point. It will create a Tutorials program group, and it will store the files in a folder called C:\user.

Important Note: This tutorial is optimized for a screen setting of 800x600 and 256 colors and will only work properly in Windows if the Screen is set to the Small Fonts option. You can adjust this by right-clicking on your desktop in Windows 95/98 and selecting Properties at the bottom of the menu that appears. Then select Settings, and in the Font Size menu, choose Small Fonts.

Using the Tutorial

After downloading and installing your *Toolbook* Tutorial, you should open the Tutorial program group. Follow the onscreen instructions on how to use and navigate within the modules. Click on the “First Time User” button and explore! You may even want to create your own hotworded passages for student discussion and analysis, which can easily be done as clickable links on a web page.