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## Beyond Technical Competence: Technologies in English Language Arts Teacher Education (A Response to Pope and Golub)

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As I consider the issues that Pope and Golub (2000) bring up in their seminal discussion of “principles of technology infusion” I am reminded of an article I recently read in the *Allegan County News*, the weekly newspaper that serves my area. The article described the purchase of a new set of digital projectors for one of our high schools, and hailed in a bold pull-out quote, “The new system can also be used for designing and preparing *PowerPoint* presentations.” Supporting the article was a picture of a technology administrator in front of a screen with an image, pointing with a laser pointer. The tone of the piece was a familiar one to anyone who has ever played with technologies, both in the classroom and personally—excitement at what can be done with a new technological toy. The general message we were to take from the piece was “Wow! Look at the progress our small, rural school is making!” Even the title of the article reflected this belief that technologies will inherently improve the education of the students—“Fennville students receive the gift of technology.”

But what are the complications of this “gift?” What are the best ways to use it? What complications may result? Regardless of the cool transitions, laser-letter effects, and snappy backgrounds, a *PowerPoint* presentation that passes on information is not much different than a chalkboard and overhead lecture. It did not appear in this case—as in many cases—that the pedagogi-

cal implications of the technologies had been as well thought out as the technical ones. **How** *PowerPoint* could be used effectively, or even **why** it should be used in classrooms appeared to be lost in the enthusiasm over the mere existence of the new equipment. The possibilities of collaboration, audience development, discussion of multiple genres—all language pedagogical practices made possible by the new technologies—were not discussed in the article. Neither were complications that result from issues of unequal access, ethics, research, or computer-assisted pedagogies.

As I read, I wondered if anyone in the school had taken the time to question why these technologies were improvements or considered critically examining effective means of integrating and infusing them in the current curricula and goals of the teachers and school. Before I position myself as “anti-technology” let me describe my own background—I have developed a reputation, both during my career as a middle school teacher and in teacher education, as a “tech-geek.” Not only am I an advocate of teaching with technology within my own department, but I have also advocated technology in local schools and in professional settings. I strongly believe in the power of technologies to, as Pope and Golub describe, “change the very nature of teaching English language arts.” However, unlike the uncritical approach of the “cool, *PowerPoint!*” stance I saw in the enthusiasm of my local newspaper, I am not as concerned with questions of “how” in terms of technical issues as I am with questions of “why.” In other words, the question to ask is, “Why is this technology appropriate for my context?”

And I believe that this is the attitude we need to bring to our English education contexts—an understanding not only of what is possible with technology, but why is it advantageous to use those available technologies. And this is what makes Pope and Golub’s piece so important. It offers us an introductory framework for answering these sorts of questions, and thereby creating a better understanding of the best means of appropriating technologies in English education contexts.

In this piece, I offer the framework I use when I make decisions regarding technology in my own English education classroom. Thus, rather than critiquing their arguments, I want to add to the discussion by providing another means of practicing the principles they discuss.

## Beyond Technical Competence

When I teach with technology (and the majority of my courses are in a networked wireless classroom), my goal as a teacher is to use those technologies to improve the teaching knowledge of the preservice teachers in my care. I spend more time asking “why” than I do “how.” Pope and Golub referred to this in their principle of technology infusion that asks us to “evaluate critically when and how to use technology in English language arts classroom.”

This is a key point in technology integration and teacher education. In typical teacher education contexts, with limited student contact time, we do not have the luxury of considering technologies as separate entities. We must go beyond the concept of “technical competence” and consider these technologies within the critical framework of the English language arts classroom. That means that class time must be spent not only considering technical and user-related aspects of the technologies, but also practicing pedagogical uses and critically analyzing their effective use in various contexts. This does not mean that technical competence is ignored; it simply means that this competence must be placed within a larger series of goals or a pedagogical framework. In our context, it is not so important to know how to use the technologies—that is, successfully negotiate these technologies as a user—but to be able to teach with the technologies. When an English education class becomes more focused on technology than it does on making those technologies part of a productive and active context of teacher development, then the goals of the course (and the “principles of technology infusion”) have been subverted.

When I ask myself questions of “why” when I am considering infusing technology or technological issues into my classroom, I consider three overriding uses of these technologies:

- increasing my students’ knowledge of English language arts concepts and pedagogy
- creating opportunities for professionalizing and pedagogical practice
- developing critical professionalism towards teaching and technologies

### **Knowledge of English Language Art Concepts and Pedagogy**

Among other questions, I judge the value of an activity that uses technology in this regard by how well I anticipate it will improve my students knowledge of English language arts as a field and a profession. In particular, I ask: Will this activity/project:

- increase our engagement with materials, concepts, and practices?
- create interest in future lifelong exploration of this issue?
- provide opportunities for exploration that would not exist in a non-technological setting?
- subvert or challenge my students' stereotypical/archetypical notions of traditional "English" activities?

### **Opportunities for Professionalizing and Pedagogical Practice**

Likewise, Pope and Golub considered other ways of using technology as a means of professionalizing future teachers, including practice with issues such as evaluation, consideration of positive models, and other pedagogical opportunities. I interpret this aspect of technology integrating by asking myself questions that include the following: Will this activity/project

- give students the opportunity to practice their skills as teachers in ways that enhance their pedagogical content knowledge?
- create resources that will build ideas for teaching and engage us in discussion "as teachers" rather than as students in a classroom?
- connect students with teachers and learners from diverse contexts and immerse them in a teaching culture?
- Introduce students to the English language arts teaching community beyond our institution?

## Critical Professionalism

One of the key points that resounds through Pope and Golub's piece is their inherent belief that future English teachers should be able to critically consider their uses of technologies and the effect those technologies will have on their classes, their professional activities, and the ways they teach. I also believe this. In my classes, the ultimate use of technology is to develop teachers who bring to their classrooms a sense of critical professionalism and competence in regards to those technologies. So, the final questions I ask myself as I infuse technologies into teacher education include: Will this activity/project:

- help teachers learn to understand appropriate and inappropriate uses of technologies in English language arts classrooms?
- create an understanding of context in the integration of technologies?  
and,
- ultimately—help teachers become reflective and critical in their uses of technologies?

By asking these questions and constantly evaluating not only what I am doing with technologies in my English education courses, but why I am doing it and correlating it to my goals as a teacher educator, I hope to ensure that I never fall into the trap of using my limited “methods” time mired in becoming a teacher of technology, rather than what I desire to do—teach students to become enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers of English language arts—who can use technologies.

## References

- Brown, B. (2002, January, 31). Fennville students receive the gift of technology. *Allegan County News*, A2.
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