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From Linear to Multimodal: Redesigning Lessons with Technology in Mind

The authors ask instructors not to focus on becoming technological experts in the classroom, but to share with their students in the learning experience.

As teachers, we are always involved in the ongoing cycle of evaluating and revising our lessons through teaching, analyzing assessments, and reflecting on learning goals and outcomes. While we may be quick to engage in re-designing lessons based on content or pedagogical needs, it may seem more challenging or threatening to re-design lessons with technology in mind. There are many reasons why teachers may shy away from heavily investing and integrating technology into their classrooms, though we are only addressing one of the most frequent in this article: lack of expertise. Many new and practicing teachers alike feel the added strain and pressure of seeking out and acquiring expertise in educational technologies as a daunting task. The time to explore these new tools is an investment in itself; then to practice and learn enough to become experts who can teach the tools along with the content may feel like more time (and responsibility) than is worth the effort. However, our approach to re-designing lessons with technology focuses less on the role of teachers possessing expertise and more on shared expertise and exploration throughout the learning community. While not necessarily a new perspective for teaching or an especially enticing entree into new tools, this approach to lesson redesign is a useful reminder for all teachers--no matter the level of experience with technology--of how to approach and prioritize the planning process around what really matters in the classroom.

Background

Our approach to remixing assignments draws from the process of curricular inquiry embraced by Mishra & Kohler's (2006) theoretical framework of Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge (TPACK). This framework is contextually situated within a teacher's unique experience, as he/she evaluates curriculum and student outcomes to determine areas posing persistent or troubling problems. In

order to solve these problems, teachers are encouraged to draw from their knowledge and experiences with: technology (T), pedagogy (P) and content (C). The most transformative instruction will be informed by all three: lessons that integrate the role of technology in approaching both pedagogical and content knowledge. With this focus in mind, the teacher, as researcher, then looks to creatively seek out solutions by repurposing tools and ideas in creative and innovative ways.

Another model that works with TPACK to help us analyze and understand the different ways we use technology in our classroom spaces is SAMR (Puentedura, 2006). This framework highlights four ways in which technology may be integrated into lesson design: supplementary uses (substitution and augmentation) and transformative uses (modification and redefinition). It is important to note that these four categories do not represent a process or a hierarchy necessarily, as different learning goals may require different uses for technology. Yet, striving to move beyond purely supplemental uses is important to engage students in the more "hands-on," creative, and collaborative dimensions that technology tools have to offer.

Our process of redesign draws on the idea of remix situating the role of instructor as "re-mixer" in reconceptualizing more traditional composition assignments in new ways that embrace the flexibility and multimodality of digital tools in online spaces. This process encompasses three forms of remix: composition, mindset, and participation (Callahan & King, 2011). In early discussions about how the lesson could be redesigned, we definitely felt "the pull" to begin by choosing a technology we wanted to work with, either because it was "flashy" or exciting or because it was something we were already familiar with. However, this is an important point at which our approach to remixing lessons will reposition the course, as we resist casting ourselves as experts or beginning with external motivations, and we return to our central context: our students, our learning goals, and our beliefs as teachers.
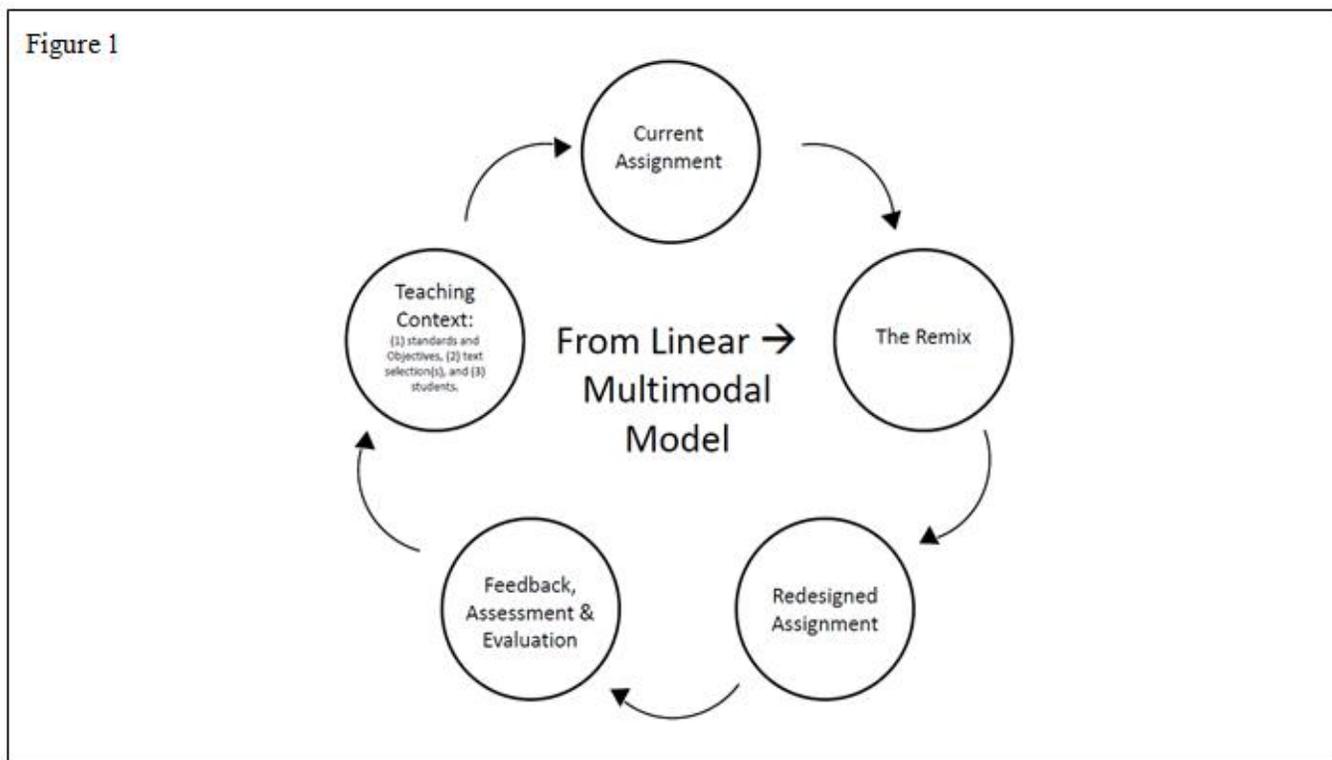
Application of the "From Linear to Multimodal Model"

Admittedly, as we began to redesign the assignments that hand been "handed down" to us from our predecessors, the notion of creating a model for remixing had not yet occurred to us. It wasn't until we had remixed the assignment and began creating examples of the activities that the cyclical nature of this process became apparent; we also realized that one pass through the remixing process would be insufficient to reach our instructional goals. In fact, the very nature of the changing contexts in

teaching and learning—be it content standards and curricular, technology, or classrooms of students—makes this process inherently iterative. As such we created the "From Linear to Multimodal Model" to keep ourselves honest and organized while we worked through the process. Below is an illustration of the model (Figure 1), and while we suggest beginning with the **Teaching Context**, entry into the process can begin at any stage.

To assist with understanding how we applied the model, as well as how it can be modified and adapted to other teaching and learning contexts, our process of remixing an assignment is outlined below.

Figure 1

Current Assignment

The Remix

Redesigned Assignment

Feedback, Assessment & Evaluation

Teaching Context: (1) standards and Objectives, (2) text selection(s), and (3) students.

From Linear → Multimodal Model

Teaching Context. We realize it can be problematic to boil teaching contexts down to *standards/objectives*, *text selection(s)*, and *students*. This was done, not to oversimplify the acts of teaching and learning nor to suggest that one of these tenants is superior or even equal to another, but simply as a means of creating a "starting point" that did not involve the technology component of the remix. As such, we, current doctoral students, formerly secondary English teachers, began with our context of being charged with assisting preservice undergraduate teachers to reflect upon and write about their interpretations and interactions with "literacy."

Our first group of students to complete the remixed assignment included two cohorts of secondary content preservice teachers. The students were in their first practicum placement and had already worked with one another as a cohort for one semester. For the most part, students fit the emerging perception of digital natives, individuals who live with digital tools fully integrated into their lives. However as research has shown, digital natives still need intentional support to help them discover the potential for bringing technology tools into formal learning experiences--as students and as preservice teachers (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008; Hargattai, 2010; Lei, 2009). While most of our students already used accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, or Instagram, our newly designed lesson would challenge them to think (perhaps for the first time) about the literacy practices they engage in through those mediums.

For us, the "text selection" for of this project was cohesively connected to the actual assignment. Our original model design reflected this connection and placed "text selection" in the **Current Assignment** sphere. However, after deliberating on this version of the model and thinking about how we—as well as others—might apply it to other courses and assignments, we decided to include "text selection" in the **Teaching Context** sphere. Our "text selection" however will be discussed in the **Current Assignment** section—and only further demonstrates the pliability and adaptability of this model.

Current Assignment. For the original assignment students were to integrate course readings, specifically Gee's (2001) definition of "discourses" as "ways of being" (p. 526) and Brandt's (2001) analysis of the role of literacy sponsorship in shaping experience and understanding, into their written reflections and analyses. The assignment, dubbed the "Literacy Autobiography," also challenged students to draw on the complexities of the ever-changing 21st century school as a means of uncovering the sociocultural factors impacting literacy acquisition. While this Literacy Autobiography assignment was a component of most secondary and elementary literacy courses, the specific nature of this assignment varied from course to course. Yet, the underlying purpose of the task remained the same: students were to synthesize theory, lived experience, and the practices of teaching into one cohesive essay.

After teaching the Literacy Autobiography assignment for one semester, we realized the limitations of this narrative centered on an overall lack of student engagement for the project. Generally,

students did not see a purpose, or audience outside of us as instructors, for the assignment; nor did students see any authenticity in the connections they were asked to make between the course readings and their personal experiences of literacy acquisition. Another limitation arose out of the formulaic construction of essays, often with not only similar organizational structures but even oft-repeated stories. More specifically, we received countless essays in which our students recounted experiences of bedtime stories read to them by their parents evening after evening. For example, one student wrote:

> Every night, around 8:00 pm my dad would shout throughout the house, "…it's time for bed!" and I always replied, "But don't I get a bedtime story?" Story time was my favorite part of the day, and I enjoyed my mom or dad reading to me.

While we don't want to downgrade our students' experiences and memories, we also wanted them to become aware that not all of those they teach will have had these same experiences. Additionally, we, as two white and middle-class doctoral students, could not provide any personal counter narratives to our predominantly white and middle- to upper-class students (Apple, 2006).

The Remix. As such, we created a "remixed" assignment by shifting the representation from a "traditional" written essay (which was previously completed directly after finishing course readings and primarily focused on students' past experiences with literacy) to a multimodal assignment that encompassed multiple layers of reading, writing, and reflection; as well as moved the scope of students' reflection *from the past to the present*. In the remixed assignment students first completed course readings and participated in course discussions, just as they had done in the previous version of the assignment. However, instead of then completing a traditional after-reading essay, students were offered a menu of digital platforms and tools (Twitter, Instagram, Prezi, iMovie, blogs, etc.) to create a "representation of lived experiences" that could be analyzed using the lens from the readings. By shifting the choice of technology to students, it allowed us to offer supplementary feedback to developing projects without needing extensive technology expertise ourselves. While the prospect of implementing such an open-ended project can be intimidating and may seem only possible at higher grade levels, students in fact are often able to demonstrate far more adaptability to using technologies once they have been provided with an initial purpose framing the project and degrees of scaffolding that respond to different student needs. Similar experiences

at the middle school and high school levels (where students were empowered to self-select tools and share expertise through collaboration) encouraged us to believe this "hands-off" approach might be just as successful at the university level.

This remixed assignment called for students to use these tools as a means of capturing and presenting everyday moments of literacy in their daily lives. The representations were then posted on a classroom website, along with short written reflections, so students could view and read their classmates' work to better conceptualize the theories of literacy acquisition through the identification of patterns across the projects. By allowing students to self-select the technology tools and modes of representation for this assignment, we attempted to provide greater student autonomy over both process and product, all without requiring us as instructors to possess any greater technical knowledge or skill than the students themselves. This not only took the pressure off of us to have "all the answers" related to technical questions (ie how do I add music here?) or questions of representation (ie do I need to add music?), as these questions were negotiated and navigated by students working in collaboration and support of each other.

The following chart (Figure 2) summarizes our process of working through the steps of analyzing context and the current assignment to redesign the literacy autobiography. Guiding questions appear on the left with examples of our thinking (in relation to this assignment) on the right.

Implementing the Redesigned Assignment. While our students were still reading, writing, and synthesizing, we feel as though the remixed assignment also called for critical thinking through the examination of everyday literacy practices as well as comparing these experiences to those of their classmates. In the remixed assignment our students built Prezi presentations linked to their Facebook pages, used Instagram to show examples of bilingual texting conversations, and created I-Movies uploaded and shared with Vimeo. We were continually impressed by our students' creativity with the technology, but more importantly, by the ways in which they were thinking about literacy discourses and sponsors. It was clear to us that our remixed assignment had accomplished at least one of our instructional goals.

Figure 2

Guiding Questions	Written Think Aloud
What are the limitations of the original assignment?	1. Students do not realize the homogeneity of most of their experiences 2. Lack of engagement and purpose for the students 3. Students could not make connections between the theory (the readings) and practice
What goals do we have for the new assignment? (Suggestion: you may want to prioritize these so you know what is "non-negotiable" and what the new assignment can do without.)	1. For students to make connections between theory and practice 2. To create an authentic and engaging assignment moving from their past literacy experiences to their current and everyday experiences 3. For students to be able to share their experiences without taking up too much in-class time for discussion
What types of activities would meet our goals?	1. Allowing for student choice 2. Having students share or present their papers 3. Moving from a linear (traditional/formal) assignment to capturing authentic "everyday" literacy practices 4. Having students reflect on the project, their process, and newfound perspectives
What technology can be used to complete the activities? (Use the Pedagogy Wheel for iPpad app ideas or these articles from Education World — Technology Tools, Integrating Technology, or Tech in the Classroom — for some ideas)	Any application that would allow students to visually capture their everyday literacy experiences.
Craft the new assignment.	Refer to our handout for a remixed "Literacy in Action" Assignment.

Additionally, having students post their representations on the classroom website and requiring them to view at least half of their classmates' representations also proved to catapult students' thinking. Students were able to recognize that many of us had similar experiences, and that these experiences shaped how we looked at literacy, the role of family members as literacy sponsors, and how all of this could potentially manifest into hegemony and Eurocentric—as well as "middle-class-centric"—dispositions. The new assignment also positioned us, as instructors, as equals in the class and allowed everyone to step into the role as "teacher" when demonstrating their fund(s) of knowledge.

Feedback, Assessment & Evaluation. The importance of framing our process as cyclical is to draw attention to the need for constant re-evaluation of instruction based on assessment results, student feedback, and broader goals and needs that arise out of more generally evaluating the experience. While our remixed assignment accomplished many of the objectives we constructed prior to designing the new project, we did face new limitations created by our planning decisions. The major limitation we encountered was the lack of depth and complexity captured by students'

representations of everyday literacy practices without accompanying reflection or analysis of experience (which might take either written or oral form). While the practices themselves were more varied, immediately relevant, and "brought to life" through the use of multi-modality (which written essays could not capture), they lacked the storied nature of the original assignment. For example, in the original assignment one student wrote:

> The thing that I had trouble dealing with was the fact that three times a week, I would get pulled out of my traditional class. As a kindergartener coming back to a classroom after being in ESL was always hard to do. I wanted to be able to learn what the other kids were being taught and I wanted to participate but when it came time I was always taken out. And even now looking back, I remember how insecure I felt being titled as one of the ESL students because there was often a negative stigma for the students who did not understand what kinds of things we were learning about.

This example, from one of our few English Language Learners, was something that might have lent itself better to the original more linear and traditional written paper. Going through this process of lesson

remixing helped us to identify the opportunity to remix the assignment once again, as the next iteration integrated a written component to complement the multimodal digital representations.

Conclusion

Moving from a required traditional essay to a student selected digital assignment required students to experiment with content (what experiences they would include), mode (which digital tool they would use), organization (how this would be arranged within the affordances of their chosen tool), and representation (how meaning would be constructed through image, text, sound, etc). And yet this process of remixing did not require additional technical knowledge or expertise on the part of the instructor. Our remixed mindset of insider perspective positions technology as essential to understanding what "is"--not as a peripheral publishing tool but as a tool that shapes what is expressed, how it is expressed, and ultimately how it is interpreted throughout the production process. Finally, the remixed perception of participation and roles in the classroom allowed us to take risks and allow for greater agency and exploration without increasing our own workload. While one of us has extensive experience working with and teaching with digital tools, the other considers herself a less experienced novice who is often not even sure where to begin in integrating technology into her assignments. Our approach to remixing recasts the role of instructor as co-learner in a more participatory environment that relieves the pressure and uncertainty of inexperience and embraces risk-taking and play, as students are encouraged to re-conceive not only the role of literacy in their lives but also the multiple ways they are able to communicate these stories.

Additional Resource

We've also included a link to a handout we created and shared previously for going through this remix process.

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