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From the e-Sphere

Writing in the e-Sphere:
Where Connectivity and Literacy Collide

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Abstract

In setting forth the intended philosophy of the eSphere column, the column's editor introduces what is possible in the teaching of writing in today's technological climate as compared to the much less connected era when he started teaching several decades ago. At that time, computers were viewed as tools supporting behaviorist and algorithmic training philosophies, whereas current perspectives regard them more as adjuncts to constructivist and connectivist methodologies, and where writing is concerned, as a means of promoting authentic communication enhanced by social networking. Technology is now seen to facilitate most aspects of each step of the writing process. The eSphere column intends not only to document developments along these lines and to shed light on their impact on teaching writing, but to foretell them, following and extrapolating the trends and paradigm shifts as teaching practitioners utilize and adapt the affordances inherent in modern technologies. The column aims to encourage teachers to experiment and become familiar with the new tools and the most appropriate methodologies for their use. It is hoped that the eSphere column will become part of the conversations among teachers promoting informal learning with one another, which in subsequent stages can be applied with transformative effects in classrooms.

KEYWORDS: WRITING INSTRUCTION; COMPUTER AIDED INSTRUCTION; WRITING AND COMPUTERS

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Introduction

I have an interest in the history of the part of the world where I live, and in light of this I was wondering how far back to reach for material for my introduction to the section of this journal, "From the e-Sphere," that I am charged with editing. I decided to start with Sir Richard Francis Burton, the 19th century explorer, a prolific writer and translator who mastered over two dozen languages. Realizing that authentic communication was key to the process, one of his methods was to hire native speakers to accompany him wherever he went. In so doing, Sir Richard was enhancing his linguistic skills through an early form of connectivism (Siemens, 2004, 2005).

This was a time when vast tracts of land in Central Asia were too rugged or too desolate to have been mapped at all, and even the borders of two competing empires, Russia to the north and the British empire of India to the south, simply dissolved in this wasteland. There appeared in this era colorful adventurers from both Britain and Russia, highly proficient in local languages, who traveled clandestinely between Delhi and Kabul, Khiva and Bukhara, Merv and Korkand, often disguised as itinerant pilgrims and traders. In carrying out their real work of mapping and spying, a linguistic slip could mean exposure and certain death. These early explorers were at the top of their game in a world which was changing for them as the borders of the two competing empires were drawing inexorably closer to one another. How did they do it, how did they learn languages so thoroughly as to acquire near-native competence?

For those of us in less threatening environments, the motivation to learn languages is neither as heightened nor as dedicated as it was for those early adventurers. It could even be said that the techniques for learning languages intensively have hardly been improved on since that time. When I started teaching languages in the late 1970s using the received technique of *mim-mem* (short for *mimicry and memorization*, later labeled disparagingly as "drill and kill"), it was thought that languages could be learned if students would simply regurgitate the forms of the target language orally or in writing without regard to meaning. It's possible that the art of language instruction was at a nadir at the point at which I happened to start my teaching career, but many were even then recognizing the deficiencies of behaviorist approaches and moving into more cognitive and constructivist means of helping people to develop their linguistic skills. Meanwhile I am still being subjected to language teachers who ask me to repeat or translate this language form or that structure when what I want to do is speak meaningfully to the teacher or other students.

Part of the reason for the dominance of behaviorist methods in the mid-1970s was that for most people trying to learn languages then there was simply too little opportunity for real communication in a foreign language, hence the need

for contrived stimuli for getting people to produce language in contexts with impoverished linguistic input. Language exposure often was based on "canned" bits of input (made-up words, phrases, and sentences). Language labs had collections of audiotapes, with silences between recorded utterances creating gaps where students were meant to record their responses to prompts, usually meant to be imitations or modifications of the input. At this time, writing was based in transformational grammar and sentence-combining exercises leading up to more extended prose often addressed to an audience of one: a teacher. Language teachers could not be blamed for feeling that their professional journeys were skirting trackless, barren wasteland. Fortunately, computers were coming on the scene, and I was an early advocate of their humanist potentials for helping people to learn languages through communication with one another (Stevens, 1992).

Vivian Zamel and Anne Raimes were two writers at the time who described the many stages of the writing process and what should be done in practice to help teachers work with students at each stage, as discussed by Hanson-Smith (this volume). Colette Daiute (e.g. Daiute, 1985) took these techniques into the technical realm, writing about how word processing might facilitate various stages of the writing process. This was not necessarily apparent to practitioners at the time, many of whom felt that use of computers was short-circuiting the writing process, not facilitating it, not to mention undermining the venerable skill of penmanship. Traditionalists believed that the writing process should start with freewriting followed by rounds of feedback on numerous hand-crafted drafts before producing a final product. Meanwhile, as computers began to replace the old typewriters in their offices, teachers themselves slowly started to adapt the new technology to their own writing tasks, and *their* process of writing changed even as they continued to teach using the old methods with their students, so that some teachers ended up teaching writing processes that they themselves were no longer using. The obvious truth was that writing things out longhand was simply too tedious, and despite the opportunities for revision that might be introduced when students were required to do them, making multiple hand-crafted versions of one's compositions was not a skill that was likely to carry over into real life.

Peter Elbow was at this time promoting techniques whereby writers could read their writing aloud to one another and receive feedback in a controlled, dispassionate manner (Elbow, 1981). I had the opportunity back then to participate in a small graduate-level seminar where Elbow's techniques were followed exclusively. I found the procedure to be quite effective for idea-generation and reflux, and it was my first strikingly positive experience with the power of feedback on developing one's writing. However, it's neither common nor generally efficient to convene writers and readers in the same physical and temporal space for the purpose of devoting time to providing feedback on one another's writing.

Again, technology has provided a more practical solution, as the emergence of blogging along with other sites and services have put people in touch with one another through social networking. The development of Web 2.0 has had transformative impacts on how teachers view and particularly teach the process of writing. It's not necessary for anyone with an Internet connection to write in isolation anymore. Learners can tap into networks of other learners and, through techniques we will elaborate on in future articles in this journal, can write for one another, and not solely at the whim of their teachers. Publication was once the carrot at the end of a writing process that seemed sometimes driven by a teacher with a stick. Now, publication might occur at the very early stages of writing; that is, students might create blog posts or collaborate on wikis that go straight up on the Internet, and the process itself can be sprinkled with rewards as student work attracts the attention of peers and invites feedback that matters greatly to the writers themselves. Ideas are then developed through genuine communication with peers who become interested in each others' work, and polished writing occurs as a result of feedback from a variety of sources, perhaps including teacher guidance. Paul Allison's videos are an excellent example of how this kind of interchange between students happens in practice: (http://www.veoh.com/series/paulallison).

Sadly, many teachers neglect to keep current on the very latest developments at the intersection where technology meets pedagogy. In the early days when computers were replacing typewriters as the communication device of choice on teachers' desks, teachers were adapting their own writing process to the conveniences afforded by word processing while holding students to writing techniques more appropriate to clay tablets than to silicon chips. Students rarely questioned this because they themselves were often less sophisticated in use of technology than were their teachers. Now, however, the tables have turned. Students are more likely these days to be *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) with online presences developed since early childhood, whereas teachers tend to be *digital immigrants* whose professional use of computers may revolve largely around absorbing content on the Internet, keeping in touch through email and instant messengers, and creating content locally via word processing and similar applications.

One goal of the "From the eSphere" section of *Writing & Pedagogy* will be to help teachers hone their skills in tapping into robust distributed learning networks of knowledgeable peers. Social networking and filtering content as it streams in over the Internet are not really second nature to anyone. Techniques for handling information overload and communicating with networks of like-minded peers need to be learned to the extent that they will be useful in helping teachers and students achieve their pedagogical goals. Young learners are more likely these days to use social networks in maintaining networks of friendships

than are their teachers, although it is not uncommon for teachers to engage in online professional development through distributed communities of practice (e.g. Webheads in Action URL, http://webheads.info).

It has been pointed out that these two tendencies of (i) students leading active social lives in their extra-curricular social networks, and (ii) teachers engaged in professional development in theirs, do not necessarily overlap where they would help most: in classrooms. Students well-versed in extensive dealings with friends and acquaintances in social networks after school tend to regard this as their private life, and schools typically restrict students from interacting with their personal networks when they are in class and on campus. Teachers, on the other hand, might (or might not) be engaged in interaction with peers informally through distributed learning networks (*Twitter* or *Ning*, to name just two examples). The challenge for teachers is to make the transition from what works with peers who self-select to bootstrap one another in shared learning experiences to viable pedagogical models applicable to their more diverse and more instrumentally motivated student populations. In so doing, teachers must take into consideration the constraints placed on the formal learning environment where learning outcomes tend to be narrowly defined, and often on the basis of models of learning not current enough to incorporate competencies in the concepts and skills most needed for keeping up to date in the 21st century.

Since the New London Group defined the term (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, *et al.*, 1996) one shift in thinking that impacts writing with respect to literature is the concept of *multiliteracies*, whereby the traditionally dominant literacies associated with reading and writing are not necessarily seen as privileged over other visual and auditory communication skills. In this way, the concept of literacy is expanded to include other modes of communication recognized as crucial to successful communication through digital media. There are numerous paradigm shifts that teachers of all subjects, not just writing, must make in utilizing multiliteracies in their own learning processes before they can effectively bring these to bear on those of their students. Making that leap requires a re-thinking or re-interpretation (if not outright restructuring) of learning systems and how expected outcomes should be defined when preparing students for careers that may not have even been invented yet.

In order to make these transitions, teachers must first familiarize themselves with the latest learning modalities and practice them with one another. By following conversations in which the latest learning technologies are discussed in light of their most useful applications to education, teachers can practice with one another, gain some familiarity with the tools, and begin to understand how to apply them in learning environments where they are confident they will work best with students.

It is intended to explore such environments more fully in the "From the eSphere" section of the journal. Articles in this section will seek to explore the ether at the edge of the envelope, where teachers are pushing their understanding of the most appropriate uses of the Internet and educational technologies in the teaching of writing. Our way may not be as fraught with peril as with those intrepid explorers from a century ago, but our aims are similarly ambitious in seeking transitions in the way the world interacts and views learning and knowledge that will carry us into uncharted territory in the century ahead. The eSphere section aspires to forge meaningful pathways into this territory. For those of you teaching writing, we encourage you to contribute your ideas on how to explore and exploit digital contexts in writing and pedagogy.

About the Author

Vance Stevens teaches computing at the Petroleum Institute in Abu Dhabi. He is the "From the e-Sphere" editor of *Writing & Pedagogy*, the "On the Internet" editor of the *TESL-EJ* (Electric Online Journal), and sits on the editorial board of *Computer Assisted Language Learning An International Journal.* Vance is past chair and founding member of the CALL Interest Section of TESOL and the founder of the online community Webheads.

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