

*Considering eLearning and Collaborative Learning in secondary schools – an
Australian perspective*

Drew Mayhills

Applecross Senior High School, Australia

0132

The Asian Conference on Technology in the Classroom 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

Drawing upon my experiences as an English teacher in a West Australian public school, this workshop explores a number of case studies in which groups of secondary school students were able to achieve improved outcomes with the support of technology.

Australian schools are in the process of implementing the Australian Curriculum - a set of national documents designed to promote a collaborative approach towards eLearning. Applecross Senior High School was involved in trialling the forthcoming Australian Curriculum in English throughout 2012, ahead of its 2013 launch. This workshop aims to share both the successes and challenges I experienced in this trial, whilst encouraging teachers to reflect upon these ideas in their own contexts.

To meet the requirements of the new English course, students were involved in the production of contemporary, multimodal narratives inspired by 'traditional tales.' I plan to showcase a number of these short films produced by student groups, produced entirely with smartphones and 'iMovie' software.

Furthermore, I will discuss the advantages that digital technologies present in terms of curriculum differentiation for students with special needs. Specifically, I will examine the ways in which access to webcam-equipped laptops and tablets has enabled students with learning difficulties to fulfil the requirements of presentational and speaking tasks.

The workshop will conclude by outlining several of the technology-based English programs I plan to trial in 2013, including a documentary film production task focused on environmental sustainability in Western Australia and a creative writing/poetry eReading group with a partnership school in Tampa, Florida.

Considering eLearning and Collaborative Learning: An Australian Perspective

Konnichiwa - good morning ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, please allow me to say what an excellent conference this has been so far. The quality of the presentations I saw yesterday was fantastic. I am very much looking forward to the rest of the conference.

My name is Drew Mayhills and I teach English at Applecross Senior High School, a state school in the southern suburbs of Perth, West Australia. Just a few quick things about myself; I am relatively new to the teaching profession, I thoroughly enjoy working with young people and I am very excited about what technology has to offer in an educational setting.

In the next thirty minutes, I will share with you some of my own experiences that demonstrate how technology is transforming the way I teach and subsequently, the way the students in my classes are learning.

Before I do that, though, I would like to pose two questions to you. I should preface that I definitely *do not* have definitive answers to either question, though I will share my personal views with you. What these questions will do, however, is serve as a conceptual framework for the rest of this presentation.

The first question – and although it may seem obvious, I think it's one we don't ask often enough – is, 'What is the point of school?' I've asked a lot of students this question in the past couple of months – and as you can imagine, the answers have varied dramatically. I have heard that the point of school is 'to study.' I have heard that the point of school is 'to get good grades,' and I have heard that the point of school is 'to get to know how the world works.' Perhaps the more practical purpose of school, as one student told me recently, is to 'work out what you're good at, so you can be paid for it when you grow up.' You might not be surprised to learn that a few of the more troublesome students I asked remain convinced that there is no point to school whatsoever – but that is a separate issue.

In my view, the point of school is **'to prepare young people to be productive, responsive and responsible citizens that participate fully in their communities.'** It certainly sounds great aloud and it looks wonderful on paper, but I think it represents an extraordinary challenge.

The second question is, 'In 2013, what are the essential new skills that young people need to acquire at school in order to participate in society?' As our virtual identities and actual selves begin to merge, I am seeing in my own classes the need to develop a new kind of student; a critical thinker with the ability to exist in online *and* offline spaces. I believe that in 2013, schools need to be enabling students who are able to shift easily between these two modes.

Schools are complex machines and individual schools have an obligation to consider their own context when they are planning their objectives. For example, a school of approximately sixty students in the remote and largely Indigenous community of Bidadanga has an entirely different set of contextual circumstances to the likes of

suburban Applecross, where some 1,200 students largely aspire for entrance to university. Irrespective of school context, however, I would sincerely hope that teachers all over the world can agree that schools must place two essential goals at the forefront of their planning:

- The first of these goals is that **students are taught how to thoughtfully integrate technologies into their lives in a way that enriches them.** I very deliberately used the words *productive*, *responsive* and *responsible* in my answer to the first question – ‘What is the point of school?’
 - ***Productive*** – because there is an obligation on educators to teach their students *how* these devices can drive productivity, as opposed to hinder it;
 - ***Responsive*** – because we can only hope to develop responsive students when *we* are personally responsive to new technologies ourselves;
 - ***Responsible*** – because in an age where people ruin the reputations of themselves and others through the mismanagement of social media, students clearly need to be *taught* how to use this technology with due diligence.
- The second goal is that **students are taught in a way that promotes and celebrates the merits of working together – that is, working in collaboration.**
 - It is imperative that young people leave school able to work and get along with people they don’t necessarily know, or even like. Every conceivable future available to them requires this attribute in some capacity.

With these ideas in mind, I want to consider today how eLearning and Collaborative Learning can help teachers to achieve these goals.

- **I define ‘eLearning’ as any type of educational activity that incorporates some degree of technology.**
- **‘Collaborative Learning’ I define as any type of educational activity that is undertaken in a spirit of cooperation with another student or students.**

I am not advocating for one moment that technology in the classroom is ‘*the way of the future*’ and that one day soon, teachers themselves will be obsolete – that is entirely incorrect. The truth of the matter is that *technology in the classroom is already here*, and the teacher has never been more essential to the learning process. The cultural assumption that technology in the classroom will ‘throw out the baby with the bath water’ - that is, replace the teacher altogether - needs to be addressed, as does the misnomer that employing technology in the classroom will only make teaching more stressful. I will dismantle some of the reasons for this view at the end

of my presentation. What *is* required, however, is an initial investment of time, effort and commitment to creating a teaching practice rich in eLearning and Collaborative Learning.

I want to conceptualise these ideas at three levels; in the classroom, across the school and around the world.

Considering the classroom level first, I wish to explore a few of the ways I have embedded eLearning and Collaborative Learning into my own pedagogy.

For those of you not especially familiar with Australian culture, the idea of egalitarianism – the idea of ‘a fair go for all’ – is one that resonates strongly throughout my country. This philosophy underpins my use of an application on the iPad called a ‘Random Name Generator’ in my English classes. It is a simple enough concept: once a list of names is submitted to the app, a single tap of the screen ‘randomly’ selects a student name. There are endless possibilities to how this app can be used – nominating project groups, deciding who will present their speech first, selecting who will answer a question. While it is intended to serve as a ‘name’ generator, a teacher can submit any information they want and draw upon that. Consider for a moment the teaching possibilities in uploading literary quotes, key dates in history or scientific formulae. This is the kind of thoughtful eLearning can enhance *any* classroom practice.

Students respond positively to it for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is fair – because I have removed favouritism from the decision to ask a student a question. No more ‘teacher’s pets.’ No more ‘...but you always pick on me, sir.’ And why should a student with the surname ‘Williams’ always get to present their speech two days *after* a student with the surname ‘Bourke?’ A random name generator, then, is an exercise in both equity and efficiency.

Randomisation can be set to work its way through the student list or draw on students repeatedly, thus ensuring that student accountability remains constant. No one knows whose name will be generated next and a name could very well be repeated twice in a row. Beyond that, it is ‘fun’ – the anticipation of not knowing whose name will appear on the screen lends an almost theatrical quality to the learning experience.

The second app I want to examine is the use of a simple ‘Timer’ to outline how long has been allocated for a given task. In concept, this is hardly revolutionary; teachers have been using stopwatches, egg timers and the clock on the classroom wall for years. A timer that is accessed through eLearning, however, is pedagogically superior, for several reasons. Presented via a screen projector or a television, this kind of Timer is significantly larger than any of its predecessors and thus, clearly visible to everyone. Animated in real time, students constantly know how much longer they have to complete their work – this kind of overt expectation builds further safety into a lesson whilst reinforcing student accountability. Again, in terms of ‘fun,’ a novelty sound can be assigned to play at the end of the time allocation. My students often joke that there is no way they can fall asleep in a class where a deafening digital ‘alarm bell’ rings on a regular basis.

These simple eLearning enhancements to what is essentially Collaborative Learning practice have enriched my lessons to no end. An ongoing collection of anonymous feedback from students about the use of these technologies has revealed an overwhelmingly positive response. Comments regularly refer to the way this approach makes class ‘more interesting,’ ‘more fun’ and how ‘it makes class fair...because everyone is always included.’ While a small number of students were critical of the dependence eLearning places on access to Wi-Fi connectivity, they nonetheless supported the use of technology nonetheless.

At this point, I would like to invite you into one of my Year 8 English classes at Applecross Senior High School to observe some eLearning and Collaborative Learning in practice, as well as hear a selection of unscripted responses from a number of students about the use of technology in the classroom.

(VIDEO – CLASSROOM LEVEL 3:06)

Beyond the context of the individual classroom, I would now like to consider eLearning and Collaborative Learning at a whole school level. I am going to share with you three case studies of students using eLearning in my English classes. A short, informal interview with the students involved concludes each work sample. Each of these case studies highlights a specific advantage that an approach inclusive of eLearning and Collaborative Learning can offer an entire school community.

The first benefit to acknowledge is that eLearning and Collaborative Learning encourages and promotes new interdisciplinary connections. Most of us would be familiar with the established rapport between Maths and Science, or the conceptual links that Economics and Accounting share. On the other hand, the subject areas of English and say, Physical Education, have – at least traditionally – not enjoyed that kind of companionship. Through eLearning and Collaborative Learning, however, new opportunities present themselves for historically disassociated subjects to forge new relationships. At Applecross, one such emergent relationship is developing between English and a branch of Social Studies called ‘Asia Awareness’ – a newly established priority within Australian schools. Inspired by their work in ‘Asia Awareness,’ these two Year 8 students decided to reproduce a modern version of ‘The Story of Yeh Shen’ for my English class, in which they were studying traditional storytelling. Beyond their creative use of stop-motion animation, Amy-Lee and Fabiola’s work is indicative of an approach in which eLearning facilitates the purposeful sharing of knowledge between subjects, promoting a holistic attitude to learning at the school level:

(VIDEO – ‘THE STORY OF YEH-SHEN’ 1:15)

Another advantage eLearning provides is that it enables teachers to make greater accommodation for students with special needs. Sadly, not every student with special needs is supported the way they should be. Too often, overstretched school systems determine that a student’s learning difficulties do not warrant the appropriate funding or support – the young lady whose work I am about to show you is one of those students. Bec – who is a pleasure to teach, by the way – has issues with processing information, struggles with basic comprehension and as a result, regularly battles with

anxiety at school. Unfortunately, she does not qualify for any kind of additional support. Her success in class is highly dependent upon the extent to which I can differentiate tasks to navigate her learning difficulties.

In a study of autobiographical writing, students were required to present an excerpt of their work to their peers. Knowing that Bec would not cope at all with this, I offered the entire class ‘an eLearning alternative’ – to produce a short film using iMovie presenting the exact same material. With this differentiation, Bec went on to complete work of an impressive standard. The collective efforts of the whole class were later celebrated in a subsequent ‘film premiere,’ in which a number of projects were screened for other students. The whole experience has done wonders for Bec’s confidence – and she is particularly thrilled about the fact that I am sharing her work at this conference. Take a look at this excerpt from her very Australian day out:

(VIDEO – ‘A GREAT DAY OF CRICKET’ 1:16)

The last point I want to reiterate at this level is how eLearning and Collaborative Learning enhances authentic engagement *for everyone* at school. The term ‘engagement’ is sometimes overused in education – but a teacher who is deeply conscious of their environment *just knows* when students are fully engaged in the learning process. A readily observable sign of that engagement is when you see students who love coming to class; students who spend the whole time *actually interested* in what is happening.

Equally, students can *instinctively sense* when a teacher is engaged with the learning process. A readily observable sign of that engagement is when the teacher gets to spend the whole lesson *actually teaching*. Genuine engagement minimises the need for behaviour management because the teacher is too busy cultivating and nurturing the students’ interest in their subject. The potential that eLearning and Collaborative Learning offers, therefore, in terms of long term positive change to an entire school culture, is incredible – and I would suggest that in many instances, it is yet to be fully realised.

To demonstrate this, I am sharing the experience of a student whose behaviour has historically been problematic. The student in question, a young man named Emmanuel, is an individual who regularly seeks out opportunities to, in his own words, to ‘space out’ – that is, to misbehave or go ‘off task.’ His willingness to engage enthusiastically in eLearning and Collaborative Learning, however, has utterly nullified any previous inclination he may have once had towards disrupting my class. Like the other students whose work you have seen previously, Emmanuel’s project is inspired by an unlikely combination of subjects – in this case, English and Interschool Basketball – but what I find most interesting are his comments on how the use of technology turns an otherwise uninteresting day at school into an worthwhile experience:

(VIDEO – ‘WHAT BREAKS YOU MAKES YOU’ 1:12)

The final component of my presentation today gives consideration to eLearning and Collaborative Learning at the global level. It has long been said that in the age of digital communication, the world has gotten ‘smaller’ – and in terms of what is now possible between schools around the world, some truly exciting projects are situated well within the realms of possibility.

Prior to teaching in Australia, I completed most of my teaching practicum while studying at the University of South Florida. I have since kept in touch with several staff at Liberty Middle School in Hillsborough County. Every so often, over Skype or email my colleagues and I would discuss the possibility of our respective classes working together on projects, organising student ‘penpals’ and otherwise thinking up ways for our students to share aspects of their broader school experiences. Invariably, the logistical issues associated with maintaining endless classes of emails functioned as something of a disincentive.

But that was in late 2009. The ever-increasing efficiency of internet-driven communication in 2013 provided sufficient motivation for a colleague from Liberty and I to launch what we describe as an ‘iExchange’ – the modern day equivalent of a ‘penpal’ style international school partnership, but one that actively seeks to utilise eLearning to facilitate the Collaborative Learning process as much as possible. This is very much a new venture for both schools and we are in fact only about two months into the process. My own students produced a ‘Welcome to Applecross’ video in which they introduced themselves and asked some questions of their new ‘mates.’ Here’s a short sample:

(VIDEO – iEXCHANGE 1:21)

We plan to partner students from either school in the near future for the purposes of collaborating on written and audio-visual texts, as well as providing opportunities for them to form friendships with people outside their own cultural context. Initiating such a project, of course, has unearthed new ethical considerations and challenges - but it is a tremendously exciting project to be a part of. To any teachers in the audience who are perhaps interested in conducting an ‘iExchange’ with another of my classes from Applecross – please come and introduce yourself later, as I would love to discuss that with you. Needless to say, students from both countries have displayed boundless enthusiasm for the project. The possibilities are indeed endless for this kind of globalised eLearning and Collaborative Learning – the virtual classroom remains entirely unaffected by the tyranny of distance.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that not everyone is as optimistic as I am about the impact of technology in the classroom. I teach at a school that is in some ways resistant to change – to eLearning, in particular. It is occasionally frustrating to be met with that resistance, but I can understand why it exists. For years, teachers in Western Australia have been constantly baited by their employers that the latest gadgets would achieve the impossible. Promises were made that could not be kept – promises of technologies that would ensure engagement; promises of technologies that would guarantee the raising of standards; promises that, with new technologies, the constant pressures on teachers would be reduced.

Such ventures in the West Australian education system have not achieved these goals – I can personally relate to instances in which life has been made harder. So the cultural inclination to reject these ideas is, in some ways, justified. My view, however, is that this resistance is a direct result of the Australian education system overlooking the requirement to *teach the teachers* one of the goals I outlined at the beginning of this presentation: **how to thoughtfully integrate technologies into their lives in a way that enriches them.** On this point alone rests a compelling case for the broad dissemination of eLearning and Collaborative Learning methodologies in schools.

On the strength of my personal experience in the classroom, I am convinced that a practice rich in eLearning and Collaborative Learning yields superior outcomes in terms of student engagement, student accountability and student academic achievement. The scientific measurement of these variables is important – after all, it is the basis on which we determine what kinds of options will be made available to students beyond graduation. But I would like to stress that academic achievement is only *part* of what happens every day in a high school classroom.

What was the point of school again? I suggested that schools exist **to prepare young people to be productive, responsive and responsible citizens that participate fully in their communities.** Well, everyone wants to get good grades – but that only takes care of the part about being *productive*. In 2013, schools have an obligation to equip young people with the skills to use technologies thoughtfully and with maturity – that is, schools must enable students acquire the ability to be *responsive* and *responsible* within the online and offline worlds they inhabit. In addition, teachers must ensure that **students are taught these skills in a way that promotes and celebrates the merits of working together.** I firmly believe that a combination of quality eLearning and Collaborative Learning practices constitute a powerful vehicle for teachers to achieve these goals.

I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation that I am relatively new to the teaching profession. However, in my short time in the classroom, I have observed some extraordinary transformative changes in students as I continue to further integrate eLearning and Collaborative Learning into my practice. The feedback I regularly receive from students, parents and colleagues, in addition the academic results of students themselves, all lend support to the notion that eLearning and Collaborative Learning offers teachers the opportunity to create lasting positive change in the lives of young people. On that note, I would like to conclude my presentation by sharing a short film entitled ‘Kindness to a Stranger’ by a Year 10 student at Applecross Senior High School named Sam Bray. When Sam showed me his concept, I was instantly taken by its universality. I knew it would be an appropriate way to conclude this presentation.

(VIDEO – KINDNESS TO A STRANGER 1:52)

Thank you for affording me this opportunity to share my work with you, it has been a pleasure. Please enjoy the rest of the conference and have a fantastic time in Japan. *Domo arigatou gozaimasu* – thank you very much.

