

WIKIS + TECH = WIN-WIN COMBINATION

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Abstract

It is undeniable that most students are immersed in a world that is full of technology. From smart phones to I-pods our students are exposed to technology 24/7; therefore, it's clear that our teaching practices have to be updated in order to fulfill all the expectations brought about by these new technologies. Have you been wondering what you could do to update and not die trying? In this article you will find all the very simple steps of a project on the adaptation of traditional classroom activities into their digital—era version and the use of Wikis -one of the most powerful free and easy-to-use Web 2.0 applications—as a tool to integrate these activities.

Resumen

Es innegable que la mayoría de los estudiantes están inmersos en un mundo lleno de tecnología. Desde los teléfonos inteligentes hasta los I-pods nuestros estudiantes están expuestos a la tecnología 24 horas al día, siete días a la semana. Por lo tanto, está claro que nuestras prácticas de enseñanza tienen que ser actualizadas con el fin de cumplir con todas las expectativas provocadas por estas nuevas tecnologías. Te has preguntado qué hacer para alcanzar tal actualización en tu práctica docente y no morir en el intento? En este artículo encontrarás todos los sencillos pasos seguidos en un proyecto sobre la adaptación de actividades tradicionales a su versión de la era digital y el uso de las wikis - una de las aplicaciones gratuitas, fáciles de usar y más poderosas de la Web 2.0- como una herramienta para integrar estas actividades.

Background

In the last ten to fifteen years, the world has gone through many changes which have shaped it geographically, socially, and intellectually. One of the most important and relevant changes, has been the accelerated development of technology. This exponential development in technology has changed communications, health, businesses, human interaction and even the wiring of our brains. Such has been the change in the wiring of the brain that it has created a division between those who were born before the technological boom, digital immigrants, and those who are still being born within it, digital natives. There is no need to clarify that most EFL/ESL teachers, fall under the category of digital immigrants and there is a gap that we must overcome in order to fully reach our students. Now, seeing our students as digital natives, it is undeniable and evident that most of them are immersed in a rapidly changing digital world. From smart phones to I-pods our students are exposed to technology 24/7; therefore, it's clear that our teaching practices have to be updated in order to fulfill all the expectations brought about by these new technologies. As a consequence, we carried out a project on the adaptation of traditional activities into their digital-era version and used Wikis as a tool to integrate these activities.

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Thus, it is the objective of this article to give practical ideas on how to use the technological tools we have at hand creatively by shedding some light on how we could adapt traditional activities to their 21st century version. Moreover, we will briefly show how much richness and accessibility Wikis, as a free collaborative website, can bring to those digital versions of the traditional activities.

Why should we use digital tech?

In the world that we live in our students have a very active digital life and it involves being updated with what goes on around their world. Besides, what we have once seen as magical and incredible, like Professor Dumbledore, in Harry Potter movies, taking his memories from his head with his magic wand, depositing them in a pensieve and living his memories once and again, has become a reality. Gadgets like cellphones, smart phones, cameras, and camcorders have made that magic possible and an everyday thing. In fact, such has been the impact of these gadgets that they have redefined the way in which our students see the world up to the point that the use of words has become old fashioned and boring when using them to tell someone about what happened at a party, at a meeting, or the like. Hence, this modernistic way of perceiving life, like an endless news channel which broadcasts the latest news from all over the world, has led our students to find in the web the necessary tools to fulfill the needs created by this new tech era. So, why should teachers keep seeing technology as a set of neoteric gizmos? Why should teachers keep seeing the web just as a source of authentic materials? and what is more, why should our students keep seeing the web as something completely unrelated to learning? Throughout our experience using digital tools to give a twist to traditional ways of carrying out activities, we discovered significant advantages that led us to continue the research and to find ways of redefining our practice.

Implementation of technology in the classroom

Digital Publications

As if technology hadn't changed our lives enough already, it is a fact that most of the time that our students spend outside of the classroom, they invest it in activities that challenge them. These activities range from playing video games to designing their own avatars and virtual worlds. Additionally, these activities that our students are so much into are not only related to technology, but they also are carried out online. Nonetheless, even if these activities take place in the virtual world they perceive them as real. Therefore, it is evident that our classroom needs activities that are engaging and meaningful to our students and to their innate over-excited creativity. In fact, such creativity cannot be restrained just to drafting and using the materials that our budget can afford such as canvas, alphabet tracers, and graphic markers. As a matter of fact, our main objective relied on giving our students the chance to let their creativity flow as they used the language to find their own voice. Despite how hard it might seem to achieve this, we did and with flying colors just by using the web and the power of Wikis as a tool for collaboration.

It all started on a day when we were preparing the plan for our class. We had been puzzled looking for and considering different types of activities that could attract students more than the typical opinion essay. We knew that the topic was as attractive and thought provoking as making your shopping list, so we were almost compelled to find the way. Fortunately, it came to us as a flash of creativity that we could have our students write an article expanding their opinion about the topic, including pictures from our old magazines and using different types of cardboard to create a nice layout. However, we were doing the same thing as always, we were binding our digital native students to the last century classroom, not the one they were entitled to have. Hence, we decided to do the same activity, but digitalized using Wiki pages instead of papers, Google images instead of magazines and videos from YouTube to give it that special touch.

Having envisioned the elements of the project, the procedure was as simple as ABC from there. First, in class we set the topic on the whiteboard and let our students discuss about it in order to generate ideas. Second, we worked on the structure of the article and we presented the idea of doing a digital one in our Wiki. Third, we set the requirements in terms of the language that had to be included in the article. Before we let them put their hands on, we elicited which kinds of things they would include in the article and suddenly, as if we had struck an oil well, amazing ideas started to burst from our students in terms of how to do it, what to include, how it should look, etc. After that, we directed our students to the computer lab, we let their magic flow, and we suddenly became facilitators of their own autonomous learning.

After 100 minutes, we had in our hands not only a bunch of upbeat students but we also had semi-professional looking magazine articles. What is more, these students were so enthusiastic that they had included all the required language aspects in the project and had made it look their best. They showed a true commitment to the activity and to their final outcome. As the creative process went along, they did peer editing helping each other give the best they could. By the end, they actually voted online to choose the best article and gave critical and constructive feedback to each other. Just imagine the sense of pride and achievement when they found their work published in the institutional Wiki, which meant that all members of the institute could appreciate their work. As if it weren't rewarding enough, our students could read and comment online on the articles of other students who they had never seen due to schedule reasons. Additionally, since they had a profile as members of the wiki with picture and some personal information they could actually run into each other in the hallways and recognize each other by their work.

TV shows

Another direct implication that arises out of the use of technology is the possibility of accessing the media with just one click. Such immediate access to the media has drastically changed the flow of information, and it has given the possibility to anyone with a recording device and an Internet connection to broadcast whatever they want. Even further, our students have become active users of sites like YouTube, and Google videos, in which they post their videos and replies to videos from other people whenever they want. Bearing all this in

mind, wouldn't it be logical that our students find dull and old-fashioned the typical role-play activities that we carry out in class? As a matter of fact, they do. Nonetheless, these old fashioned role-plays can be easily adapted, enhanced and exploited by using Wikis and any of the technological gadgets that reside in our students' pockets capable of recording a video.

When we set ourselves to adapt the traditional role-plays to something more current for our students, we didn't come up with the idea of using vodcasts (video podcasts) and recording a TV show right from the beginning. In fact, there were certain elements that we had to bear in mind such as the resources available, pedagogical implications, learning outcomes, our students' interests and the compatibility with the topic being covered. It was not until then, that the idea came to us naturally to have students create their own vodcasts in the form of a TV show since with proper planning they would cater to our needs and our students'.

Before we could yell: "Action!" and start shooting as in a Hollywood production, we had to consider the technology that we had at hand and especially the technological resources that our students were familiar with. To our surprise, we realized that we had all the essential components at our disposal with little or no expense to us. The first item that we needed was a device of any kind that could record video and audio with a decent quality. To suffice the need of such recording device, we had a standard web cam and microphone plugged to our class computer and all our students' cellphones, which by now are 10.000 times more sophisticated than any of the computers in the Apollo 11. Then, we needed to solve the problems of storage and editing software which in fact could thwart the project since paying for software licenses and web servers was out of the question. Nevertheless, we came up with an array of possible free solutions for the video editing by using sites like www.cuts.com and solutions for the storage by using www.youtube.com, Google docs or even the storage room provided by our wiki server.

Though we had sorted out all those minor details, we weren't ready to start rolling yet; we still had to carefully ponder how to carry out the activity, the pedagogical implications and the learning outcomes that these TV shows would have. Since we were adapting the traditional role-plays, part of the road had already been paved in terms of the pedagogical implications. Additionally, designing how to carry out the activity wasn't such a feat. Basically, we set on the whiteboard the kind and topic of the TV show. The theme delved deeper into what we had been working on for several classes, the language that students had to include and some general guidelines to follow in terms of organization. Then, since we had students of different age groups we formed groups mixing young, digital native students with older, digital immigrant ones. Nevertheless, we were flabbergasted not only by the richness in terms of learning outcomes but also by all the windows that the use of Wikis opened in this activity. For instance, we could easily appreciate that our students had gone the extra mile in terms of language since they not only used the vocabulary and grammatical expressions that we requested, but they also added connectors that would help them organize

and clearly transmit their ideas. What's more we were thrilled by the enthusiasm that was imprinted in the TV shows.

All in all, after completing such an ambitious project together, we teachers and students, discovered truly amazing and somehow unexpected outcomes from it. To begin with, students showed an amazingly increased responsibility towards their language production. Besides, it created a sense of self-awareness that no other speaking activity could have done before. It is common for us teachers to correct pronunciation or grammar mistakes during oral activities over and over with different students and not seeing the expected change. Now with this kind of twist to the activities students could see their performance from another perspective and therefore work on self-correction at a deeper level. Another aspect of this project was the opportunity it provided for reflection upon their performance and from a starring role; they became TV hosts for a while and were able to impersonate their own versions of Oprah and Larry King while working on their language. Together with this came the publication of the final project in our Wiki which as we have mentioned before gives students the chance of sharing their work and progress with family and friends and in the most realistic way possible.

Conclusion

Generally, ESL/EFL class teachers deal with topics that are current, interesting, controversial and thought-provoking. Consequently, the spark of critical thinking is kindled inside our students, and finding the best way to keep this spark alive becomes a tough job for the teacher. Two factors that make it difficult to keep that spark burning is first, the generational gap there is to bridge between teachers and students. Second, the lack of means to spread students' voices and engage other students to share their own views. Nevertheless, the new WEB 2.0 technologies offer students the chance to interact to interact with the world by the development of projects and to expose their ideas. Otherwise, the traditional speaking class activities are gone with the wind and the papers of written activities are lost in oblivion. On the one hand, the technological tools such as podcasts, vodcasts, cellphones, and mp3s fall short in fulfilling all our needs. Consequently, in order to provide the twist to the traditional class activities and shorten the gap between them and the interests of the new audience in our classes we chose Wikis. Successfully enough, Wikis have been the most innovative Web 2.0 tool to centralize all students' work and open them as a window to the world, having access to their work WHEREVER, WHENEVER, WITH WHOMEVER, they want. With a combination like this we cannot say anything else but that it is a win-win situation. Students' creativity, motivation, and critical thinking are boosted by being able to use the tools they handle every day to connect to the world as part of their lessons and without losing their social skills for being in front of a computer. At the same time, their products are posted online and they become eternal, open to the world and unquestionable evidence of their learning process.

Suggested Reading

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- Bell, A. (2009). Exploring Web 2.0: Second generation interactive tools – Blogs, Podcasts, Wikis, Networking, Virtual Worlds and more. Georgetown: TX: Katy Crossing Press.