



## Confessions of a Luddite

Suzanne Achleitner

### Where It Started

My aversion to technology dates back five decades to college chemistry where a slide rule was required in solving mathematical problems. My ineptitude with that simple tool discouraged me from ever taking another science course which required its use. I managed to avoid further encounters with technology until the 1980s. I was tutoring in a university writing lab, which was exploring the use of *Word Star*, an early word processing program. Like many, I initially resisted its use because of its difficulty and railed against the harm a spellchecker would have on the students' critical spelling skills. An unfortunate incident when one of the lab techie's floppy disks got crushed in the elevator door, destroying all of the lab attendance data, simply fortified my resolve to avoid this new technology.

For approximately ten more years, I managed to successfully insulate myself from computers and all other "modern" means of accessing information. Yellow pad and pencil were my tools of the trade. Everyone knew that the flow of the pencil across the paper triggered one's brain to create in a way that no computer keyboard ever could.

### My Transition

Then my working world changed, and my ostrich days came to an end. I no longer could keep my head buried. As Einstein said, "Necessity is the mother of all invention." In the mid-1990s I was offered an opportunity to escape from the grind of teaching three Freshman Comp classes for starvation wages. Suddenly my focus shifted from being the teacher to providing professional educational opportunities for other teachers. Knighted by the university Vice President to carry forth the torch of technology, thus enabling the citizens of Kansas to have greater access to education, I suffered baptism by fire. Suddenly I was frantically networking with those more experienced in the infant field of distance learning.

I was faced with satellite downlink and uplink, the Internet, computer-assisted learning, synchronous versus asynchronous learning, teleconferencing, and ISDN lines. I found myself both terrified and electrified by the possibilities for improving the educational environment. During this period my attitude toward technology was irrevocably changed.

Then as now, it is easy to be dazzled by all of the bells and whistles that technology can provide—to be seduced by using technology for technology's sake. However, after participating in those exciting years of paradigm shifts in learning technology, I still find my methodologies aligned with B.F. Skinner's belief that the teacher is responsible for constructing the learning environment in such a way to optimize student learning--everything a teacher does, from the way papers are graded to how students are seated to how the class time is divided into mini-learning moments; every tiny thing is part of that educational construction. And the role of technology in optimizing that environment should be the basis for all course design decisions. Technology should be *a part of* the course design, not *apart from* it.

### My Return to the ESL Classroom

This brings us to the second phase of my affair with technology: I returned to the ESL classroom to apply my varied experiences and to test my ideas for integrating technology in the traditional face-to-face classroom. My first steps were to go beyond the "drill to kill" use of technology. I decided to use some of the simple word processing functions to help students achieve many of the course's more advanced writing outcomes--from simple grammar to more complex rhetorical skills. For example, (1) "coloring" all verbs yellow with the highlighting function helps students quickly identify their verbs and focus on correct verb tense and form; (2) coloring independent clauses one color, dependent clauses another, and phrases a third color helps them check for run-on sentences and sentence variety; (3) checking paragraph structure by coloring the different parts different colors—topic and concluding sentences, transition words/sentences, support--helps them evaluate the quality of their paragraph; (4) by giving a different color for the various coherence devices--repeated key words, synonyms, antonyms, personal, demonstrative, and possessive pronouns, relationship words, students can assess varied ways to create "flow" in one's writing; (5) analyzing the different types of support within a paragraph for more effective communication by using different colors for an example, a comparison, a

restatement, an explanation, a fact, statistic, or specialist's opinion, etc; (6) and in research essays differentiating between their "voice" expressed in thesis statement, analysis, and conclusion and the "voice" of outside source information to help them check for correct synthesis and sufficient analysis of ideas. By coloring a paragraph with two different colors—one for their words/ideas/interpretation/explanation, and the other color for outside information, the colors' visual effect gives the student immediate feedback on its content. It immediately shows them that writing a research essay, one of the mainstays of higher education, requires far more from the student than presenting a string of quotations and paraphrases from source material.

By helping students "see the trees through the forest", "coloring" both expedites and facilitates the learning process. It forces their attention on one aspect of grammar or writing at a time, making the learning task clearer and more manageable. More importantly, this coloring tool empowers the students by enabling them to critique their own work. Navigating through the language forest becomes a journey of discovery.

Teaching ESLP 126 taught me another way to use word processing in my course design. Instructors normally give student feedback on their essays through footnotes using a coding system developed by Chuck Seibel. I love this system since it allows me to give a more complete explanation of the problem. I can maintain a digital record of the essay with my comments, and probably most importantly, the students can easily access and read my typed comments. As expected, most students are very appreciative of the more in-depth and conversational guide for revising.

To this grading technique I added another dimension--individualized remediation grammar exercises. I created a chart of URLs for pedagogically sound online, self-correcting grammar exercises for common errors. If a student has a specific problem, for example subject-verb agreement, I can easily "paste" a URL of the specific remediation exercise into the footnote. Most students are enthusiastic about doing these exercises since they provide quick intense practice for their specific weakness. Progress can be amazing if the student is engaged. I've found this online system of grading in ESLP 126 so effective for both the students and myself that I implemented it in my ESLP 110 class as well.

### **Blackboard**

Actually these techniques have been easy to integrate and posed few obstacles. However, when I decided to put my section of ESLP 110 online with Blackboard, it was apparent that adapting a course for Blackboard was more than a simple exercise in changing the coursework access format. Admittedly, my progress was baby-step slow with much trial-and-error learning. It was the students' enthusiasm for the new format and transformation that encouraged me to forge ahead. It was apparent that by employing Blackboard, students had to assume more responsibility for accessing the information; and in the process, developed into more invested, mature and independent learners, better equipped to digest, internalize, and adopt two of the values deeply embedded in the American academic environment: independent learning and respect for intellectual property.

Upon closer analysis of some of the functions offered by the courseware *Blackboard*, one can see how these outcomes can be achieved.

First, let's look at the Grade Center. Although initially upfront time is required to set up the grade book, especially if you wish to categorize your grades, possibly as in-class and homework, the time is well worth it due to the many advantages. The students checking their grades daily to monitor their progress provides motivation for teachers to grade student work in a timely fashion. This public posting also allows students to find any teacher errors in recording grades. For students, the grading process is more transparent, so they can never claim ignorance of missing assignments. Rarely will students claim that their final grade is unfair since they have been able to monitor their progress throughout the semester. Probably the most important result is that students feel like a part of the grading system because of the 24/7 digital record-- there are no surprises, nothing secret, or magical about the final grade. Thus, the burden of turning in assignments and self-monitoring of progress fall upon the students' shoulders. Although not all students will accept this burden, the electronic grade book can create a painless path toward this outcome.

In upper level writing courses, one of the research writing outcomes requires students to become proficient at citing outside source material. Most students are unfamiliar with research papers and face the challenge of differentiating between how their culture values intellectual property rights and the Western values taught in the university. I stumbled upon an easy solution during one class when explaining the steps students must take to submit their written work through Blackboard's SafeAssign. For most it was a new concept, and thereby intriguing. I thought it a good idea to show how the software actually helps the teacher check the students paraphrasing skills, and can indeed also help them to avoid plagiarism. After they had all submitted their work, I showed them the "teacher page" where all the documents resided and how I would go about checking each paper. Asking permission of a student to serve as my "guinea pig," I opened the "report" on their paper. The students were simultaneously dumbstruck and fascinated. Although they consider themselves pretty "techie," SafeAssign's ability to highlight the copied or improperly paraphrased text by showing the original text from the outside source was awesome for them. And while I had their full attention, we talked about how Western cultures value ideas and view them as a possession—not something to be taken without credit but to be acknowledged with respect, especially in the academic environment. Thus, the integrated concepts of intellectual property rights, plagiarism, and citations became painlessly clear. After that the students delighted in viewing the report of their papers. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but it works.

Before I close this section, I must offer a word of caution: SafeAssign does err, so it is always best to check the entire report, and share the types of errors it makes with the students. Making this software appear fallible helps them feel that it is more their friend than their enemy.

A few words can sum up these long explanations. Since our current students are digital natives, they are accustomed to accessing most forms of information instantly. They are more visual and interpret images more easily. By examining our course outcomes while familiarizing ourselves with various technological tools, a few at a time, as teachers we can choose judiciously those tools that will enhance the learning environment and create students better equipped to succeed in the American higher education system and the competitive global world. Whether it is using simple functions in word processing or using other software, we can make a difference in helping our students maximize their learning.

### **Lessons from My Journey**

In closing, let me say that I have discussed but a tiny number of the many ways technology can improve the learning environment. Blackboard has many, many functions that other instructors have successfully used—electronic journals, threaded discussions, blogging, etc. In addition, those teaching speaking and listening skills use various techniques, websites, and software to structure their assignments and critiques to motivate learners and improve their skills. My purpose in writing this essay has been to encourage those who believe they are "non-techies" to take a few baby steps at a time to explore how they as teachers can creatively utilize the best of what learning technology has to offer to restructure their course design. My journey has been a long one covering a couple of decades, and I can honestly say it has been worthwhile. In the end, it is my students who are the winners. My journey of discovery and learning continues.

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)