Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMENTARY

The Tablet Inscribed: Inclusive Writing Instruction With the iPad

Rebecca M. Sullivan

Luther College

Despite the author's initial skepticism, a classroom set of iPads has reinforced a student-directed approach to writing instruction, while also supporting an inclusive classroom. Using the iPads, students guide their writing process with access to the learning management system, electronic information resources, and an online text editor. Students are able to exchange ideas and work collaboratively in an environment that promotes fluency.

Keywords: collaborative learning, inclusive education, iPad, tablet computer, teaching methods, writing process

College teachers have been talking about integrating technology into the writing process for a long time. The conversation takes another turn when new technologies appear. Most recently, the iPad's user-friendly design has generated debate about the use of tablet computers in higher education. As someone who still thinks of stone when she hears the word "tablet," I would expect a mobile device to disrupt my teaching but, on the contrary, a student set of iPads has reinforced my approach to writing instruction in a collaborative, inclusive classroom. While I agree with the recent observation that "mobile technologies are leading to fundamental changes in teaching and learning" (Gawelek, Komarny, and Spataro 2011, 30), it must also be said that mobile devices can support new dimensions of our tried-and-true pedagogy.

· For a generation, reflective teachers of writing have heard the prevailing voice of student-centered learning. The iPad echoes that voice by giving students a tool to monitor their own writing processes, actively explore content, and work with others to express their understanding in creative ways. Most writing teachers agree that frequent, sustained writing leads to greater fluency, and it isn't my experience alone that suggests that students write more when they are using a gadget. Following a year-long study on the impact of tablets on literacy in an Ohio school, teacher and educational technologist Jim Harmon noted, "students' writing was higher in quality" and students wrote more in significantly less time on the iPads (Harmon 2011, 6). Although Harmon was teaching in secondary education, I expect to see future studies on the effect of mobile technologies on undergraduate learning.

While there are many models for iPad pilots in higher education, I worked with our IT staff to acquire a set of twenty-five iPads that would be circulated as a classroom set (Rice 2011). A mobile cart stores and charges the devices, and also stores the Mac laptop that we have dedicated to syncing the iPads. In a spirit of simplicity, we intentionally selected basic, mostly free applications to facilitate discussion and creativity. We kept Safari, Photos, Videos, YouTube, iTunes, FaceTime, Camera, and iBooks from the built-in apps, but we removed other apps, such as Music, Calendar, and App Store, that were intended for single-user devices. We purchased a single app, Good Reader, to manage and annotate PDFs. For ease of use, we completed the Home Screen with Web links to the mobile version of the college Web page, the learning management system (Moodle, Blackboard), Google Docs, the library research page, and Credo Reference (an online subscription-based reference collection).

Typically, the starting place for writing is discussion, and the iPads have proven to be very useful toward that end. Various course materials—readings, slides, images, videos, activities, and Web links—are posted on the learning management system to prompt an exchange of ideas. In this virtual learning environment, students are free to move from one resource to another. This allows them to apply and synthesize information as the conversation progresses. Tablets

Correspondence should be sent to Rebecca M. Sullivan, Luther College, Library Information Studies, 700 College Drive, Decorah, IA 52101, USA. E-mail: sullivre@luther.edu

in hand, a wealth of electronic reference collections, online databases, and digital repositories also become available for research. The ability to control their individual display gives students the opportunity to view materials at their own pace and cognitively organize the information in the way most suitable to them.

As an instructor who really tries to leverage the power of group learning, I discovered that the iPad set also works to my advantage in the design of collaborative tasks. For example, by writing in the online text editor Google Docs, students can exchange reading responses and reply to classmates' ideas. With a shared document, they can work together to refine thesis statements or evaluate counter-arguments. Supplied with a sample essay, they can highlight techniques for building coherence. Using Google Docs in a writing workshop, students can provide inline comments on classmates' drafts while the software captures a revision history. Because documents are easily shared, I can promptly display student writing from my instructor iPad to generate further discussion. Some students might prefer composing on their laptops but are reluctant to carry a portable computer throughout their class day; and yet students seem willing to come to terms with typing on an iPad touchscreen for the benefits of working together online.

As we work together, engaged in various forms of collaboration, the iPad has enabled me to develop a classroom that is productive and accessible for every writer. Drawing from the architectural concept of Universal Design, I've tried to create an environment that is usable by all student writers, without the need for adaptation. The standard iPad is equipped with various assistive features including a voiceover screen reader, support for closed captioning, and an assistive touch screen. Partnering with Disability Services, one member of the iPad pilot class employs his device as an e-reader and to dictate writing in a speech-to-text app. Using Dropbox—the Web-based file hosting service—to store and share his files, this student uses the iPad more extensively than his classmates, but gradually, I've learned to tailor all course handouts and activities to an electronic format that meets his needs. Having a classroom set of identical devices has allowed me to develop collaborative projects and writing workshops that enhance the learning experience for everyone involved.

It's not every classroom that is equipped with computers, and for a discussion-based writing class I prefer a more flexible space. This is where mobile devices come in, allowing students to move around the room with tools that promote collaboration and creativity—and access to the Web, too. Of course, anyone who has been in front of a computer-enabled classroom knows that for all its benefits, there are challenges. I set the tone by acknowledging to students that mobile devices do present a classroom management issue, and I enlist their help to make it work. My usual practice has been to announce when it's time to flip the covers closed on the iPads, giving me a clear signal that students are off screen. Ultimately, the introduction of the iPad makes learning a shared endeavor. As with all active learning models, the instructor steps aside a bit to allow students to direct the process. For the sake of student involvement, I will myself to be more flexible.

The key to improvement in writing is ample practice in a rich language environment. In addition to inviting frequent opportunities for writing and collaborative learning, the iPads open numerous venues—including discussion forums, student blogs, audio podcasts, and group Web sites—for my students to communicate with genuine audiences. Involvement in these social media is congruent with my commitment to student learning on student terms. As a device that fosters fluency, creativity, and accessibility, tablets are proving to be a new tool for teaching the very traditional art of good writing.

REFERENCES

Gawelek, M. A., P. Komarny, & M. Spataro. 2011. "On iPads: Why Mobile?" *Educause Review* 46 (2):28–32.

Harmon, J. 2011. "Research Study Finds iPad Bolsters Student Reading and Writing Skills." *AASL Hotlinks* 10 (7):1–6.

Rice, A. 2011. "Colleges Take Varied Approaches to iPad Experiments, With Mixed Results." *The Wired Campus blog, The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 18, 2011. http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/colleges-take-varied-approaches-to-ipad-experiments-with-mixed-results/33749