ECI 546 - Spring 2012

PBI Written Report

Caroline Moakley and Frances Wittman

Link to YouTube video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3sn4IzhzVY

The compelling question for our Project-Based Inquiry is, “To what extent might a multimodal tool such as Glogster aid in the development of a literary thesis?”

**LESSON RATIONALE:**

Enabling students to understand how to create a literary thesis is one of the most difficult tasks of teaching academic writing. Unlike a summary, which is concrete, or a reader-response, which is based on the reader’s emotions, a critical analysis is constructed upon what the reader thinks they know based on the evidence taken from the text. Getting the proverbial light bulb to turn on is daunting challenge for many high school students, and from this difficulty arose the question as to whether a different brainstorming approach might be more effective for some students. Thus, a PBI project was born, and Frances Wittman’s 9th grade English students at Durham Academy had the opportunity to use Glogster to make digital posters, organize their thoughts in a visual manner, and develop their theses regarding Chinua Achibe’s book, *Things Fall Apart.* The students in this classroom have been instructed throughout the academic year in the importance of organizing their ideas before writing, and, up until now, the students have always had a choice in format for brainstorming; however, those choices have always been linear in nature. The students’ typical brainstorming options have included: creating a vertical outline; filling out a form their teacher gave them, which moves horizontally across the sheet; and, of course, there are always those students that have no form to their outline at all, but instead turn in a variety of loosely connected sentences written on their notebook paper. Although the literary analysis is centered on the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, evaluating and synthesizing the information in order to create an arguable is inherent to the assignment, connecting the idea to new literacies was a bit of a challenge. The major connection we made to New Literacies was grounded on the concept of Pink’s “Six Senses,” (2005), and the multimodal tool we attempted to integrate into the assessment of our novel. The assertions made by Spires et. al in their article, “New Literacies in the US and China” support our use of a tool such as Glogster when they state, “These new media literacies, which are contextualized within digital media environments, comprise skills students need for the 21st century (e.g., play performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, etc.). Both of these areas, new literacies and new media literacies embed the fundamental theory of multimodality (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2003). Multimodality texts (i.e., print, video, still images, audio, music) offer learners unique ways to create and convey meaning”(2-3). Likewise, our overall unit was connected to our TPACK framework through the use of technology in order to gain a historical, biographical, and cultural perspective prior to our reading of *Things Fall Apart*. Then again, we also integrated our technology during our final assessment through the application of the tool Glogster as our post-reading assessment. In this way, we attempted to utilize some of the standards developed by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) regarding creativity and innovation. Working with Howard Gardner’s ideas concerning multiple intelligences, we wondered whether incorporating more than one type of learning into the activity might enhance understanding for some students, and help lead them to strong thesis development. (CITE) Glogster was the tool we proposed due to the fact that the students could arrange information in any shape they chose. Also, Glogster provides an auditory component, as well as a visual component, which would enhance the textual nature of the assignment. Likewise, students were given time to work on this as a class and discuss ideas with their peers, allowing for those who are linguistic or interpersonal learners the option of working to their strengths as well. Having never worked with Glogster, we were curious to see what the students thought about the tool. At a minimum, we were hoping to provide the students with a tool that, if not helpful with this assignment, might be useful for another class. The intended outcome was to tap into a variety of learning styles and offer the students a way in which they might come to a better understanding of not only how to create a thesis, but also get a sense of how they learn best.

**LESSON IMPLEMENTATION:**

After a two-week discussion of *Things Fall Apart*, the class turned their attention to developing a literary essay based upon the novel. We introduced the idea of Glogster, and provided three days in the computer lab for students to create their Glogster posters. To provide guidance for the assignment, we provided both verbal instructions, as well as published written specifics on the students’ Moodle page. The students were able to spend the computer lab time interacting with their classmates and with Frances, bouncing ideas off each another, asking questions, and offering suggestions to their peers, et cetera. Due to the fact that most of us had never used Glogster before, it became a collaborative effort on the part of the whole class when one had a question how best to use the tool. A question such as, “How do I increase the size of the text box?” might be posed to the whole class, and those who had already solved that problem would provide help. After three days in the lab, the students published their posters to Frances’ Glogster educator account so she could evaluate their work. Likewise, they students were expected to apply the working knowledge they developed while creating their posters to the essay portion of their unit test covering *Things Fall Apart.*

**CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:**

For the most part, teaching students how to write a thesis is a challenge in and of itself, but what Frances found most difficult during this unit was the tool itself. Many of Frances’ students found Glogster to be somewhat limiting. Quite a few students found the program to be clunky compared to similar tools such as Photoshop, and some students struggled with basic formatting – which one would have assumed to be easy and intuitive, given the purpose of Glogster. Also, the more linear thinkers in the class had difficulty wrapping their heads around the project. It took a bit for these linear thinkers to understand that the choices they made regarding the layout of the information, and the connections made, needed to be decided upon solely by them; Frances was not going to dictate how each student should organize their Glogster. Through the struggle of visual organization, the students became cognizant of their learning style differences, and some were able to tap into their visual learning preferences for optimal success. The successes came largely during the creating process. As we would brainstorm, or groups would brainstorm, students began recognizing their own learning strengths. They began to think about the way in which they learn best and tried applying that to their posters. Likewise, we found some success in the debriefing, and from some of the responses on the pre- and post-assessment surveys given by Frances to her students. Multiple students voiced appreciation of the opportunity to explore their own learning styles, and were happy to have another brainstorming option to draw upon when working on thesis development.

**COLLABORATION:**

Frances: Collaboration was somewhat difficult. I felt as if we were at a bit of a disadvantage considering I was the one with the classroom and have fifteen years of teaching under my belt, and Caroline had no classroom, nor has she taught before. I felt as if she and I opened clear channels of communication utilizing e-mail, Gmail chat, and Skype; however, the fact remained that we were largely driven by my yearly objectives. It felt as if I was the one determining the PBI, not because Caroline had no opinion, or did not have good ideas herself; rather, as I mentioned, it was because we are in such different places in our careers. Regardless, Caroline was an effective communicator and an amenable partner in all senses of the project. In fact, it was nice having a fresh set of eyes in the classroom; someone whose age is probably closer to my students than myself, so her point of view was extremely helpful. As far as my reflections regarding myself as a collaborator, I strongly feel as if every person I meet has something to teach me, so I try to listen to my colleagues as thoughtfully as possible. I was worried that my hectic teaching and mom schedules would put my partner at a disadvantage, but I do feel as if Caroline and I were well-matched due to her hectic school and cycling schedule. Likewise, I feel as if we were able to assign tasks that were tailored to each of our strengths, and open to helping one another whenever needed.

Caroline: As a green MAT student who just started her first semester of coursework, this project was, at first, pretty daunting. Reflecting upon the process, I am really grateful I had the opportunity to work with Frances and her students. Frances brought to the table everything I lacked: an actual classroom, teaching experience, and years of wisdom regarding the mythical process of instructing students how to develop theses. Throughout the project Frances was incredibly gracious, and our respective busy schedules forced us to be efficient communicators and planners. For the first part of the project we collaborated through a mixture of synchronous (Skype, Gmail chat) and asynchronous (e-mail, Google Docs) digital communication. Walking around the classroom with the digital camcorder during implementation at the computer lab, I brought an outsider’s perspective, and I was able to observe the students and their choices with Glogster, while Frances worked with students one-on-one. As I admitted to Frances, my classroom experience is still limited to that of a student, and looking at the lesson we had developed with Glogster, the student in me perceived it to be a cool opportunity to work with a text in a different way, but “student-me” would have just gone back to my tried-and-true method of written outlines, especially given the clunky nature of Glogster. I noticed some students working with pen and paper as an intermediary between the text and the computer – which I tend to do, and I spoke with multiple students about the frustration of learning a new tool while learning new material for class. However, collaborating and reflecting with Frances opened up the parallel universe of the classroom: the perspective of the teacher. Seeing both spheres of the classroom is enlightening and has helped prepare me for my future classrooms.

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