
FORUM

Hybrids, Multi-modalities and Engaged Learners: A Composition Program for the Twenty-First Century

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The hybrid English Alive program I pioneered from 2005-2008 represents the culmination of my experiences and lessons learned about academic transformation. The descriptive analysis of that process may be helpful to educators who prefer to lead with sound pedagogy rather than simply react to the changing learning styles of twenty-first century students. I conclude with the eight lessons I learned in the process.

WHY CHANGE?

As reflective college teachers, we must be continually sensitive to our student audiences. Consider this example of our future audience: in a public high school English class “a ninth grader . . . used a computer to create comics based on *Romeo and Juliet*, starred in a video project about *Lord of the Flies*, and made a digital timeline of *Odysseus’* journey and how it correlated with events in her own life” (Mahon L3). What should our new audience, these “digital natives,” experience in the college classroom? As new digital learners appear on the horizon, “it is higher education’s job to engage [them] without sacrificing good pedagogy, and to somehow teach them and learn from them at the same time” (McHaney 48).

My own experience reinforced the idea that the structure of our current composition classes at Drexel University needed to reflect the new digital world. Recognizing that the way a younger generation communicates is radically different because of emerging technology, I began researching changes in the practice of composition at several levels from elementary to college classrooms. I observed the fourth graders in a public school argue whether their report on a watershed should be a poster or a PowerPoint. They did not ask the teacher for help with the “form” of their report. They asked only if she could help their group reach an agreement on which medium to use. They had already searched the web for images and

information to use in the report and were learning how to cite sources to avoid plagiarism. These fourth graders “Google” for information as a reflex action. Their teacher, Lynne Partridge, described her students as “digital natives” and explained to me, “You and I are digital novices” (Partridge n.p.). This experience convinced me, a college composition teacher of many years standing, that changes had to be made in our teaching of composition to engage the twenty-first century learner.

It is clear that one of our challenges is the new technology. It affects the HOW as well as the WHY of what we do in ways that exceed the boundaries of classroom walls. The students of today are using social media to stay connected at levels unimaginable a few decades ago. But how to communicate with them, and to them, poses a challenge. John Gee, Professor of Literacy Studies in the English Department of Arizona State University, has conducted research that finds that “kids are reading and writing more than they ever did.” The challenge is how to help these students “to develop deep passion for how to become learners” to contend with the explosion of information and resources that can access it (qtd. in “Digital Media” n.p.). I wanted to link their constant involvement in digital media and familiarity with technology to the traditional goals of composition programs like knowing the audience, doing the research to find evidence for a point of view, and finding the best rhetorical way to communicate that point.

Emerging research verifies that the learning style of millennials is very different from that of twentieth-century learners. The research conducted by Michael Wesch on his students demonstrates the disconnect between engaged learners and bored ones whose attention is diverted from professor to mobile device. He concludes that courses should “Embrace real problems and use relevant tools” (Wesch n.p.). The irony is that students today are non-stop communicators. They are constantly in touch with one another, via email, text messaging, cell phone, SKYPE, Facebook, etc. Yet, they do not recognize these forms of communication as using skills they learn in “English.” Short stories or essays have a point of view, appeal to an audience, a tone or setting, images that enhance meaning; the very same characteristics are shared by a website, a video, or a poster, multi-modalities they encounter daily. These millennial students are aptly identified as “digital innovators who will increasingly integrate technology into their everyday lives and use it to shape the future” (Long 24). The implication is that teachers should engage with those same strategies particularly in the English classroom with authentic problems and multimodalities present in the “real” world.

Like many academic researchers, I saw the need to transform the classroom with a consideration of the new learner and the new tools. I could see how the application of skills used in composition classes could be applied to twenty-first

century modes of communication. In my long career at Drexel, I successfully directed the English composition sequence for the interdisciplinary Engineering freshman program; I knew what was needed to get beyond an individual, isolated experience to develop a pilot program that others could replicate. My successful grant experiences (FIPSE and NSF) taught me that a transformative pilot needed a sizable population, evaluation, institutional support, as well as innovative ideas (Arms, “Personal and Professional” 141). When the University decided to integrate all majors in the first year composition sections, I seized the opportunity to create an innovative program for twenty-first century learners. I persuaded the same ten teachers involved with the interdisciplinary Engineering project to help me because we already had a supportive learning community willing to experiment, evaluate, and revise to create another innovation (Arms, “English Teachers and Engineers”). Thus, I developed the pilot, English Alive: a hybrid learning community, with approximately seven hundred students and ten teachers. It has been evaluated and has evolved in such a way that it offers lessons worth sharing.

From 2005-2008 I drew on my experiences supervising teachers in diverse disciplines as well as my observations of the changing student population to lead the pilot for a new generation of students. Finding forms of discourse that allow for creative outlets rather than bemoaning students’ reluctance to engage with twentieth-century pedagogy led me to encourage multimodal projects. I wanted to encourage students’ creativity by engaging them with technology, and by designing assignments relevant to the world they would inhabit as professionals. The pilot has now transformed the first-year composition program with more than three thousand students and one hundred teachers yearly following the model described here.

WHAT THE PILOT PROGRAM CHANGED

The pilot program, English Alive, was built on the sound structure of process-oriented composition with critical reading and writing. It stressed the importance of audience analysis and rigorous research of primary and secondary sources to marshal evidence. It increased the need to write extensively by adding online writing of small, weekly assignments between class meetings. It maintained the same number of major assignments and the quantity of reading as the regular sections. Students were randomly assigned to sections and experienced a process-oriented composition sequence for the year, regardless of class format.

Firstly, the pilot of English Alive changed the delivery of course materials through the use of a hybrid structure. Blended learning, or a hybrid class, afforded

new students an opportunity for face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers to build relationships, while leveraging their expertise with online discussions and digital resources. In hybrid classes, the instructors and students had ninety minutes of class face to face to develop rapport; the remaining “class” time occurred online with extensive discussion posts.

Working in groups online, students had a prescribed number of posts with a minimum word count each week. Initially, students wrote in response to prompts from the teacher about the weekly readings or research. The introverts and the extroverts had equal voice. After a day or two to read each other’s responses, they posted secondary responses. The online forum created a writing community and a public audience that went beyond the teacher’s prompt to broaden their perspectives. They could see how other students interpreted material, considered how to critique constructively, and brainstormed ideas for writing assignments.

Secondly, an experiential component was added for the discovery of English in the community. Students were to use some of the time freed from class to attend events and find examples of English Alive beyond the boundary of classroom walls. The experience might include surveying audience members at a theater performance or book reading to discover why the attendees were there. It might include interviews with the lighting or sound engineers for a different perspective on a play. The experience might investigate ways to market a cultural event or institution. The students had discretion on the design of the assignment in consultation with their online discussion group. The result was that many of them shared social activities in attending events, and found corollary activities that supported the importance of the arts in the community. For these students, observing the role of English in the world validated its relevance in the lives of scientists, engineers, ordinary citizens, and English teachers.

Over the years, teachers have been challenged by students to explain the relevance of English to their chosen careers. The experiential component of English Alive allowed teachers to challenge students to find a broad view of “reading and writing.” Having them interview audience members at an event provided a context of real world experiences and expanded their views of English. It also placed their experiences in a social context that had economic and technological components that they had not considered previously. As a result, career focused students found themselves engaged with English because of the experiences. Many teachers, who did not adopt other attributes of English Alive, did maintain the experiential component.

Thirdly, students were encouraged to design assignments in multi-modalities, other than essays, to demonstrate their understanding of what they were reading

and reflecting on in their research. If they proposed a multi-modal project, they had to provide a rationale for the design. Allowing them to mirror the modalities that they were encountering in their daily experiences produced surprisingly creative results. While more “authentic” assignments did require re-thinking how to assess student projects, research supported the view that it would also more fully engage, even empower the twenty-first century learner (Nicol 3). In tracing the theoretical underpinnings of student engagement, Gerry Stahl concludes that “the nature of the problems that students are given is critical. If we want students to engage with a problem, it must be one that they ‘care about’ in Heidegger’s terms: it must involve issues that make sense to them within their interpretative perspectives on the world” (qtd. in Hung and Khine 18). These are students who have grown up with Harry Potter, read the books, seen the movie, visited the fantasy rides, and played the video games built on the franchise. These kids do read, but they express their ideas in multi-modalities. In an address to the National Writing Project in 2006, Glynda Hull, a nationally recognized expert on composition, urged teachers to “expect and embrace the hybridity of cultural artifacts” and to “position people as agents capable of making their worlds.” The idea of our students specifying the criteria to build their own assessment skills coincides with a national trend. Hull’s presentation included numerous examples of creative K-12 projects based on digital media.

One teacher on the English Alive team, Robert Finegan, evolved in thinking about the propriety of essays as the only way to reveal critical analysis and reflection on audience. He developed the following project that leverages an online learning community with those goals of the composition program. His collaborative assignment states in part:

You will decide together on the specific focus of your project and then refine your topics in the online “Collaborative Project topic proposal discussion.” One assumption of this assignment is that the more freedom you have, the more original and interesting your topics can be.

One possible topic involves adaptation. You could choose one of the course readings and discuss plans for adapting it to some other medium. Would any of the readings make a good sitcom? Board game? Fantasy adventure, role-playing game? Ad campaign?

In one written rationale required to justify the medium, the three students who created a board game argue that “Competition is one of the core themes of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and the board game format effectively conveys the desperate struggle to outperform one’s rivals” (Finegan n.p.).

The pilot adhered to the objectives of Drexel’s First-Year Writing Program: to help students develop skills in reading, writing, research, and critical thinking. Students

read a variety of formats from conventional textbooks to blogs. They produced “projects” in multimodalities, including final “papers,” if desired, to encompass the process of creation from brainstorming with peers to researching, drafting, peer reviewing and timely submission. For example, students attended cultural functions for a project called “the Rhetoric of an Event.” To complete a project, someone could choose to follow a director’s blog about the inspiration for choosing and developing a play; another could choose to create a project that promotes the play with a poster, a website, a video, or an ad campaign directed to their peers, or a written analysis of the audience reaction after interviewing attendees. However, students had to justify their choice of presentation mode in a written statement that accompanied the project. All projects were built in a scaffold of steps regardless of the medium: identify a thesis, target a specific audience, propose and justify a medium, develop an annotated bibliography, post a draft for peer review, comment on the revisions made, and finally submit the project.

The objectives of the traditional composition course were maintained and expanded by the substantive demand for online analysis of the experiential component with an audience of peers questioning and critiquing the ideas. The syllabus stated: “As a learning outcome you should develop confidence in your voice as a writer and communicator using various media: visual, audio, textual. . . . Your active engagement in the learning process will prepare you not just for your upper-level coursework, but also for your professional life. You will build a portfolio of your work . . .” That active engagement was immediately accessible for teachers, students, and evaluators to view on the course website.

To accommodate multimodalities and student directed designs, we developed rubrics to assess multimodal projects holistically. As English teachers today are finding, novels can appear primarily in graphics, poems in tweets, and short stories in podcasts. Like assessing the quality of new “literature,” assessing student “essays” demands a complete re-thinking of rubrics. The rubrics for the first-year writing program included creativity, document design, audience awareness, validity of research, grammar, and response to peer reviewers. The rubrics worked to assess conventional essays and the variety of modalities students designed to fulfill requirements. They were instrumental in validating the fact that technology has the power to enhance literacy, not undermine it.

To develop our rubrics, we were fortunate to have a supportive learning community that included some tech-savvy members. They gave us early access to the website subjectivemetrics.com that has a database of rubrics for various state and local school requirements, assignments (including many of ours now) that have been developed for specific projects such as oral presentations or portfolios,

as well as various elements of holistic rubrics that can be customized for a specific assignment and grade level. Such sharing of information is crucial to educators who want to develop viable pedagogy in the twenty-first century. Roger McHaney's research, published in 2011, concludes that "Educators should be looking for opportunities to incorporate new media into their classes and promote its use. . . . It is important to create course pedagogy that ensures our students will not be left behind (201)." Equally important is the deliberation of rubrics to grade the many formats they use.

THE OUTCOME OF THE PILOT

The pilot of English Alive was evaluated in several ways and deemed worth replicating for the first year program. Some of the evaluation is included here, but the most important outcome for the pilot was that students reported feeling highly motivated. Since we knew that engaging the twenty-first century learner required new strategies for teaching, we thus achieved our goal. The external evaluator reported that "Students were excited about their work...and were proud of what they accomplished" (Haslam). An initial survey of 650 students in the pilot found that 78% enjoyed the course format. Positive responders enjoyed a sense of responsibility and understood the need for lifelong learning skills, two outcomes accrediting boards list as important.

Additionally, students appreciated that the hybrid structure allowed them to be self-reliant while it provided guidance in a new environment. As one of them said in the focus group:

The face-to-face portion still manages to keep the class together enough and is useful with clarifying assignments or general ideas that we work on individually. The online portion is very beneficial in that it does not waste time with physically assembling the class together, and it allows for more work and original thoughts to be created during that time. I really enjoy the fact that everyone can complete their work in their own time. Also, everyone is made to come up with their own original thoughts and is made to input into the online class discussion, because very often during class discussions the majority of the class simply sits back and listens while a spare few carry on the conversations (Haslam n.p.).

Students appreciated that the online group could peer review well-defined steps—topic proposals, appropriate choice of medium, annotated bibliographies, visuals, and drafts. With peers as reviewers, students began to look at audiences and to develop an awareness of analysis in ways that surprised them and gratified us. Another focus group participant said:

Personally, the English curriculum has inspired and motivated me to think and question instead of accepting things for the way they are. Recently I have found myself asking the question “why”. I attribute my new thought process almost entirely to Project 1. Now, I find myself stopping and analyzing things before and after I do them. For example, walking into biology class the other day, I actually thought about where I would sit and how that would reflect the type of person I am (Haslam n.p.),

English Alive succeeded in engaging students and increasing their communication skills in several demonstrable ways. It convinced the English faculty that rather than undermining literacy, technology has the power to enhance it in unexpected ways. The program is now the norm for first-year composition with over three thousand students and one hundred teachers following the pilot described here.

FROM PILOT TO PROGRAM

The English Alive pilot illustrates one programmatic transformation, but the lessons learned can be adapted to many different types of courses. I offer eight lessons learned with concurrent steps, re-iterative processes, and various constituents. 1) Conduct broad research. 2) Seek help from experts in Information Technology. 3) Build a learning community of teachers who are willing to take risks and admit mistakes. 4) Design clear learning outcomes and rubrics for evaluating them. (This is especially important to legitimize multimodal projects.) 5) Enlist students as agents of change by informing them about the process, involving them in its assessment, and letting them see their feedback as a key element of change. 6) Conduct internal and external evaluation with mixed methodologies. 7) Present a proposal to administrators at every level to achieve broad buy-in. 8) Disseminate results to a broad community for constructive feedback.

I. Conduct broad research that considers disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches.

If the project’s goal is to change the paradigm, you must be aware of the counter arguments to your intention. Arguments against digital age composition courses often lament the decline of writing and research ability. Catherine Gourke expresses skepticism about moving away from the traditional essay paper as a threat to the “future of writing” (338). Nicholas Carr asks: “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” and answers affirmatively. Another problem identified in counter arguments to online-learning strategies is the difficulty of reading lengthy texts online. These positions generally fail to consider burgeoning evidence in many fields, including the latest findings on the

science of the teenage brain. For example, the new science of the brain points to digital natives having new strategies for comprehending digital information.

We must begin with the knowledge that researchers have documented the improvement in communication skills despite millennials' use of digital media. For example, Andrea Lunsford, a nationally recognized authority on composition, has called for change in English instruction. Lunsford's research project at Stanford University examines thousands of samples of student writing to conclude that the quality of communication skills is improving, not worsening as many feared ("Stanford Study of Writing Research Overview" n.p.).

Expanding beyond one's own discipline will often provide leads to further research that will support your desire to transform a program. Impressive research in many fields documents the strengths of the new learners in contrast to learners of the twentieth-century. Roger McHaney's *The New Digital Shoreline: How Web 2.0 and Millennials are Revolutionizing Higher Education* provides a good start for the findings and the protocols that are proving effective. Likewise, other researchers are documenting the profound changes that technology has made not simply in how people communicate, but in how their thought processes are affected. Benfield and de Laat conclude: "Values such as willingness to share and make one's learning 'transparent' to peers and tutors, seeing oneself as a learning resource for others, need to be nurtured against a weight of tradition and practice in higher education that favours individuality and competitiveness" (qtd. in Sharpe, et al. 186). These researchers argue that courses at every level can benefit from employing pedagogy that maximizes the learning skills and strengths of digital natives.

2. Seek help in online-course design from the Information Technology specialists who may be excited at new opportunities to use technology in innovative ways.

Once you have grounded your pilot in solid research, begin building the online component. Consult with IT experts who have a wealth of knowledge and tools to offer to novices. Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Blackboard, Moodle and Sakai are now widely used to house courses at many universities, but faculty have to learn best practices for course design online. The strategies that many found successful face to face are not necessarily the most engaging electronically. The IT experts at Drexel have been instrumental in the success of English Alive. They regularly offer workshops on understanding and using LMS, visit classrooms to introduce new software and maintain weekend phone help lines for faculty and students.

In addition to the courseware supported by the University, my research discovered other useful software for the pilot that is now supported by IT. Electronic

grading software, such as “Waypoint” provides a way to generate standardized rubrics and gather data beyond a single course (subjectivemetrics.com). Electronic portfolios that offer a convenient repository for student work can be integrated into the course and used throughout college. SNAPP (Social Networks Adapting Pedagogical Practice), a software application that runs in conjunction with several types of LMS, can chart the interaction in online discussion groups, to see that students are engaging in frequent exchanges (Bakharia and Dawson). These electronic resources also provide rich data for an external evaluator to assess student work and program success overall.

3. Build a learning community of other teachers who are willing to take risks and admit mistakes. Make them leaders for the expansion of the pilot.

In contrast to the digital innovators, most of our faculty members come from a generation that learned face to face. I was unusually lucky in that the faculty who taught the pilot of English Alive were members of a learning community that had been together for several years. Therefore, we had already built a community of trust. We had the ability to disagree while respecting individual opinions, try new ideas, and acknowledge missteps. The group had mixed feelings about learning new software and about giving up half of the face-to-face time with students new to a college environment, but had no misgivings about the need to engage students.

In building consensus, avoid creating a lock-step requirement. Vigorous discussion during the pilot phase revealed that all teachers are not going to be convinced that multimodal projects can meet the learning outcomes in a composition course. Since dissent is crucial to thoughtful development, it is respected in the program today as much as in the pilot phase. For example, one member of the pilot team was loath to relinquish time for multimodal projects when students’ basic analytical writing skills seemed wanting. This teacher decided not to allow projects beyond traditional writing and research essays. He did, however, appreciate online discussion forums where students exchanged responses to readings. He found the model appealed to him though for other reasons, as he wrote to me:

‘Conversation’ that takes place in the course often surpasses the conversation that would take place face-to-face in the classroom because it’s subject to the benefits of writing as a thinking tool. When students compose messages in the online environment they are often more reflective and thoughtful since they need to be more conscious of the composition process -- they have the benefit of reading/re-reading their classmates’ thoughts, and have time to reflect on the subject matter. I find that students articulate better rebuttals/answers in online discussions.(Personal e-mail)

When we turned the pilot into the model for the program, the pilot faculty became leaders in propagating the model. They were able to assuage the anxiety of many teachers in acknowledging that their students know more about digital technology than they do. “How do we negotiate difficulties attendant on becoming a learner in areas where we are accustomed to being an expert? How can we find appropriate opportunities for professional development?” (Journet 107). In my experience, data can be persuasive. The pilot team planned workshops that included presenting that external and internal evaluation data to persuade our colleagues to join our efforts. The workshops were invaluable in establishing the credibility of the hybrid model both in terms of sound pedagogy and in terms of demonstrating that rapport with students was still possible.

4. Design clear learning outcomes and the rubrics for evaluating them. This is especially important to legitimize multimodal projects for student deliverables.

In Bloom’s “Taxonomy for the Digital Age,” analyzing, evaluating, and creating top the list of higher order thinking skills. These skills are paramount in any discipline. The dilemma is developing rubrics that show that students are employing them. Complicating the assessment of student work is the variety of multimodal projects that students undertake. English Alive encourages teachers and students to focus on higher-order skills by analyzing diverse audiences, evaluating evidence, and creating a project that best communicates in a given situation. English Alive rubrics allow assessment of multimodal projects holistically to achieve a reasonable norming of standards among students and among teachers.

By the end of the first year, the teacher who had scoffed at the idea of academic posters arrived at the required weekly team meeting with a poster under his arm. He wrote:

I was initially resistant to accepting multi-modal projects because I felt I didn’t have the knowledge or experience to evaluate creative works such as posters, videos or other projects that included non-written components. But when I began allowing multi-modal projects that also required reflective analyses of the artistic work, I made a couple of pivotal discoveries. One was that I was perfectly capable of evaluating multi-modal student work because I’d been analyzing visual and aural texts for years—from films to advertisements to music. I also discovered that many students really came alive—both creatively and analytically. Not only did their creative work often exhibit high levels of craft, but they wrote about this work with greater inspiration and insight than had been evident in their responses to conventional assignments. (Personal e-mail)

Like the last teacher, many who allow projects to be multimodal find that their literary training does provide the analytical framework to evaluate them. Clarity, vivid detail, compelling examples, persuasiveness, and high quality research are as important to the new formats as they are to the standard essay paper. It is surprising to know how much allowing students to choose multimodalities affects creativity.

Freed from constraints that limited communication to the essay form, students suggested multimodal projects involving more than the expected research and evidencing creativity in unpredictable formats. Included here are samples of the types of multi-modal projects students designed when left to their own choices. The first, (Figure 1a and 1b) a door that has front and back designs, was done by a business major to “open the door” on genocide in the Sudan. The soccer ball in Figure 2 was created by a sports management major who was charged with “educating” others on a topic of his choosing, which was the role of sports in South Africa.

Holistic rubrics allowed these different projects to be graded with respect to how well they met learning outcomes. Did they analyze the designated audience? Did they have an annotated bibliography that indicated why the research was important and how it supported the thesis? Did they persuade their peer group that their choice of modality was the most appropriate to accomplish their goal? Was the rationale well argued in the proposal for the project?

Considering the choices of multi-modalities, another teacher in the pilot wrote to me, “It makes me wonder if I have been holding students back all these years by providing too much guidance” (Personal e-mail). Students have no trouble designing multi-modal projects with valid rationales in ways that could not have been envisaged in the last century. The projects that emerged from English Alive pilot drew the attention of other constituents, including the librarians who provided the sessions on library research. Because they consulted with students engaged in researching and producing a variety of multi-modal projects, they were impressed with how highly motivated these students were. Librarians, at their own initiative, hosted an exhibit of multi-modal projects in the library lobby that included a board game on *The Big Sleep*, posters, websites, CD’s, and other “compositions.” The rubrics could be applied to each project, regardless of modality, and the learning outcomes were visible for all to see.

5. Enlist students as agents of change by informing them about the process, involving them in its assessment, and letting them see their feedback as a key element of change.

For many students, an online learning community appeals to their sense of connectivity in the social networks they already use, but connecting it to English

assignments challenges their assumptions about the role of the teacher and the voice of authority. As teachers are discovering nationally and internationally, “with more freedom and choice, the students often have a greater sense of ownership or investment in what they produce, and professors can have a greater sense of pride in what their students produce” (Nguyen n.p.). Eliciting student feedback and getting their permission to have external evaluation of their work can invest the students in the program’s success.

The pilot of English Alive had involved students in several ways such as focus groups, surveys, and interviews. The online discussion posts revealed the students promoting the course goals. They knew the course was a pilot and they could be instrumental in its success. The evaluator noted, in reviewing portfolio samples, that students used the language of the course learning outcomes, as exemplified in the student comment that English Alive “has inspired and motivated me to think and question instead of accepting things for the way they are” (Haslam n.p). Student voices, especially when they freely echo learning outcomes, can be powerful in persuading outsider evaluators of the project’s success.

6. Conduct internal and external evaluation with mixed methodologies

To be an agent of change, think beyond a pilot to transform a program. Your audience is more likely to accept new methods if they have proven value: quantitative and qualitative data are key to persuasion. There are many ways to create support. Electronic data can be readily quantified to gauge student performance with various software packages. Focus groups and interviews provide qualitative data from the students and the faculty that can be analyzed to provide appeal to ethos and pathos.

For example, the pilot group used the grading software Waypoint that allowed for several ways of aggregating holistic rubrics over the year (subjectivemetrics.com). The IT staff provided a wide range of data beginning with the student tracking features of the LMS. The tracking recorded the number of words written, the frequency of interactions, and the number of posts each student at least accessed to read. The social networking map of S.N.A.P.P. validated that effectiveness of online communication in building a learning community where students were comfortable in critiquing each other (Dawson n.p.).

Such software has value in other types of courses. For example, S.N.A.P.P. graphically maps student discussions to reveal the development of complex online communities. Further research has shown that mapping the social interaction of online discussions can yield data helpful in student retention, crucial information in a first-year requirement (Dawson and Macfadyen). When students actively

engage in online conversation, they become involved with the success of each participant. They experience a sense of belonging and recognize the value of a learning community in promoting their own learning.

Assessment is crucial to a transformation of the academic landscape. For our pilot, the evaluator was entrusted “to evaluate English Alive based on learner-centered best practices through curriculum design, teaching strategies and student learning outcomes” (Haslam n.p.). The external evaluator’s report, including the internal assessment generated by faculty and students, provided evidence for the transformation of our English composition program. The matrix that the evaluator developed may be generalized to many other types of courses. It shows how the elements of her assessment, a rich methodology with qualitative and quantitative data, may be used to assess the efficacy of learner-centered processes. It provides a format for incorporating quantitative and qualitative data over several sections and semesters, incorporating data from teachers and students.

Course Framework: Offer students the opportunity to engage in academic discourse as participants in a significant socio-historical process. The principle of engagement: Introductory courses must arouse students’ interest in academic discourse and writing, sustain their initial enthusiasm, and aim to increase it.

Evaluation Goals	Indicators/Benchmarks	Method
1. Students engage in academic discourse and analyze different rhetorical events and practices.	Portfolio criteria	Course evaluations Interviews Focus group
2. Students develop skills in critical and creative thinking and writing.	Portfolio criteria Academic writing standards Waypoint criteria for specific assignments	Artifact (Portfolio) analysis Data analysis
3. Students become self-directed and reflective learners	Multiple assessments	Assessment data analysis Interviews

The results were a fulfillment of our course goals and indicated that student learning outcomes had been met: students were engaged and motivated by the hybrid and experiential nature of English Alive, online group work was valuable in building a sense of audience and affecting their personal performance, and they had become “self-directed and reflective learners.” The value of a learning community was articulated in a final group post to the online community: “I really liked the group experience. Also, I thank you all for doing your part and for posting on time

when you were group leaders. You all gave great criticism and great feedback on my papers. I guess I can say that we brought the best out of each other.” Another student posted: “By far my biggest takeaway from this class will be learning to trust my peers for review and respecting them more as an audience. The evaluator concluded: “Students appreciated that the course about multi-literacies used multi-literacies as tools for learning—for constructing knowledge. This reflexive characteristic facilitated their discoveries and insights about not only the subject being studied but also their own abilities and accomplishments” (Haslam n.p.).

Of course, the evaluation plan developed for English Alive was specific to required courses, time, and place. It is offered here to encourage others to go beyond anecdotal evidence to work with external evaluators who can employ a rich methodology for persuasive evidence to affect a transformation.

7. Present a proposal to administrators at every level to achieve broad buy-in. Having the interdisciplinary research and an evaluation plan from the beginning may convince them that seed money could lead to successful grants.

Administrative buy-in at an early stage is crucial to institutionalize a new course structure. A pilot proposal must include all the major components of research, personnel, evaluation, and dissemination.

Our proposal to the administration cited interdisciplinary research and the standards for various accrediting organizations. Even here, several teachers who were willing to enlist in the pilot reviewed the draft of the proposal. The proposal identified the faculty and considered the cost benefits of freeing classroom space for the cramped campus. When the department head and the dean agreed to support a pilot of a hybrid, I presented it to the provost. The advantage of having faculty committed to a project and departmental and collegial support persuaded the provost of the project’s viability. A seed grant provided the start-up funding to cover costs of faculty training and external evaluation.

The additional benefit of freeing class space has become crucial at Drexel University which recently admitted its largest class, approximately 3400 freshmen. The administration buy-in is now complete. As the first program in the Department of English and in the College of Arts and Sciences to build a pedagogy for hybrid classes, English Alive established a precedent for engaging twenty-first century learners.

8. Disseminate the results to a broad community for constructive feedback.

A learning community formed by colleagues within and outside the home institution is a necessity for a complex endeavor. Building a learning community

requires openness in the discussion of successes and failures, yet many faculty teach in a setting where the classroom experience is “private.” Making the discussion public allows for challenges and reflection on the findings. Then results can be promulgated and/or improved.

For example, early in the pilot, three of us gave a presentation on English Alive at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in New York City (Arms, et al). Our evidence was still anecdotal, but we were encouraged by the positive reaction. Subsequently, a media report on our program by Elia Powers appeared in *Inside Higher Ed*. The feedback directed our attention to a greater need for supporting research so as to be persuasive to more traditional faculty.

“Clear, timely feedback is as important to faculty as it is to students” (Cohen and Ellis 161). That feedback for faculty can be generated by responses at presentations and publications, as well as in workshops and focus groups. Mistakes and problems identified may be instructive for the novice and the expert. Feedback has obvious value and it is worth noting that funding organizations require a dissemination plan.

Conclusion

In summary, the descriptive analysis of English Alive illustrates the academic transformation of a required first-year composition program to a digital-age, hybrid-learning community. While some teachers and students will not embrace this type of learning, those who do will find themselves free to be creative, innovative, and highly motivated learners for the new millennium. Consider the joy of discovery one faculty expressed in an interview with the evaluator:

I've always had confidence on what I could do with a classroom. I can light a fire. My classes are always alive. So, when this whole hybrid thing came along, I balked. What I found frightened me. The students were actually better at their own prompts, working with only gentle nudging from me. They weren't constrained by the 90 minute classroom experience. They were responding to each other while on the train, on the beach, in the subway, at lunch; they were offering lengthy missives regarding their philosophies while sitting in the dorm at their computer, and tapping out short passionate replies on their cell phones while going up in an elevator.

It all comes down to the fact that if given the chance, the students are the most powerful element in education. Thanks to the online portion of the classes, they finally have the chance to really shine. (Haslam n.p.)

In conclusion, good teachers know real learning does not stop at the doorway to a classroom. They know that students coming through the door are a new audience with new thought patterns. Technology may enhance their learning in

surprising ways. The eight lessons learned from English Alive could be used to transform other programs to engage twenty-first century students.

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