

1 + 1 = 3: Combining Language Experience Approach with Web 2.0 Tools

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When software companies want to denote significant changes in functionality, typically a release number or version number is added to the end of the software title. Using this analogy, a tried and true approach to emerging literacy, the Language Experience Approach (LEA) could be said to have been through at least two releases. LEA enjoyed peaks of popularity during the twentieth century which subsided somewhat after the early 1970's. Let's call that LEA 1.0. LEA 2.0 was spawned as it became part of comprehensive literacy models (Weaver, 1994), specifically, modeled and shared reading and writing (Thompkins, 2003). Similarly, O'Reilly (2005) used this familiar numeric postscript notation when he described the new phenomenon on the World Wide Web and coined the phrase Web 2.0. With the onset of these new Web 2.0 technologies and medias, LEA is up for a new release. Web 2.0 technologies are a natural and complementary match to LEA's organic nature of creation. Thus, we now usher in the era of LEA 3.0.

Web 2.0 Description

The new functionality of Web 2.0 has opened many possibilities for learning and collaboration that can enhance literacy instruction in profound ways. But first, it is important to understand Web 2.0 and how it differs from Web 1.0. Under the old Web 1.0 paradigm, users who wanted to publish to the Web were forced to program in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and understand the Internet protocols for using HTML. Clearly, this requirement significantly narrowed the pool of users who created Web content and in fact, most web users were simply consumers of content. Conversely, Web 2.0 has been called the Read/Write Web (Richardson, 2006) because of the ease with which users can now create new Web content. To use another analogy, Web 1.0 was one-way communication or a monologue. Only those with enough resources or knowledge could actually do the "talking" while all others remained mute. Businesses, governments, and organizations created content, sometimes based on consideration of the users, but usually based on what each organization wanted its website visitors to know. Web 2.0 can be compared to a dialogue or two-way communication, but it is also one in which the barriers to producing Web-based content are so low that all one needs is the desire to produce it. By using blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other Web 2.0 tools, individuals now have an equal voice with businesses and organizations.

Web 2.0 has not only democratized content creation, it has essentially rewritten many of the rules of communication. The tools of Web 2.0 have been shown to encourage and facilitate collaboration (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) and collective intelligence (Surowiecki, 2004) like never before. Further, these tools allow product or information users to become an integral part of the creation process, adding value to the product while accomplishing their own goals (Friedman, 2006). Importantly, Web 2.0 sites are not static web pages where content is updated annually, for example. In fact, many Web 2.0 sites are updated weekly, daily, and sometimes hourly. Indeed, Web 2.0 can be described as tools that entrust the community to collectively create meaning and value, which is a rather socially mediated constructivist view (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987) that honors, encourages, and extends natural communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991)! While there is an ever-expanding list of Web 2.0 tools, this article will focus on two tools, blogs and wikis, both of which were used in a classroom environment in conjunction with and

in support of LEA ideals.

Blogs

The word blog is short for web log. Essentially, it is a website where posts are kept in reverse chronological order so the most recent post is at the beginning of the blog. No knowledge of HTML is necessary to create a blog post, in fact, creating a post is much like creating an email. Typically, blogs are used for reflective writing similar to an online version of a journal. However, unlike a physical journal, blog readers can leave comments on each blog post. In this way, blog posts create conversation around thoughts and ideas, allowing bloggers and readers to continue to refine their thinking (Richardson, 2006). Of course, blogs also have the advantage of hypertext, which is text that is linked to another web page and it is a hallmark of the Web, even Web 1.0. Reading and creating hyperlinked text is an important digital literacy for students. In fact, Warlick (2004) contends that reading Web content is like reading three-dimensionally (across, down, and deep through hyperlinks) as opposed to paper text which is two-dimensional (across and down).

Bloggng at the ASA

Creating an interest in technology not yet taught in school began as an administrative-led effort at Central Dallas Ministries' After-School Academy (ASA). This Kindergarten through fifth grade after school program is located in the community room of a public housing development in a remote area of the city. Limited access to transportation and few nearby public facilities create a situation where the large majority of children in the program have limited to no computer experience or access.

In an effort to generate an interest in the capabilities of technology, the administrator of the program (Janet), also one of the authors, established email addresses for the children, which did not generate the excitement and interest desired. Furthering the effort, she created a blog especially for the ASA and began posting pictures and entries about ASA children and events, hoping children would see pictures of themselves or their friends and want to read more. A secondary hope for the blog was that children would begin inquiring about how they, too, could write on the blog about what they were doing in the ASA. The home page of each computer was set to the ASA blog for easy access and visibility as the children walked in each day. However, though a few children made verbal comments about a picture or two, the large majority of children simply bypassed the blog to enter websites they had seen on television.

Despite the seeming lack of interest, after reading articles about teaching first and second graders how to blog themselves (Intel, n.d.; Jackson, 2005), one author (Janet) began thinking about more meaningful and interactive ways to engage the students in technology in ways that would help develop their reading and writing skills, as well as provide insight as to what the children were learning. The ASA's summer program provided the opportunity to engage children on a daily basis, which proved to demonstrate various benefits of teaching technology to children. First, by teaching them in a classroom setting, the children became more independent outside of the classroom and eventually, during free time, began informing the program directors what they planned on writing in their blog post instead of asking what they should write. Second, as they wrote, the staff was able to "listen" to the children as they "talked" through their blog posts. Third, the blog provided a medium where some of the older children who were typing their own posts felt the need to edit after learning about the possibility of a blog post being seen by people outside the program.

Since many of the students were just finishing kindergarten, first, or second grades, their literacy (and typing) skills were still emerging. To scaffold the children's experiences, students were allowed the choice of dictating their experiences and reflections for a staff member to type in or they could draw the day's events in their journals, which would then be scanned in and posted on the blog. To further develop their reading skills, one of the authors (Sheri) suggested that the children reread their blog post after each composition. Though the children sometimes struggled, hesitated, or stumbled over some of their simpler words when reading them back, with a little help they were able to decipher the entire entry they had dictated. For example, students used and easily recognized words such as "gluteous maximus," which became part of their language bank from the frequent references during the exercise and fitness classes of the summer's health and nutrition theme. Using their dictated text as authentic

and organic reading material changed the work from strictly blogging to a new format of language experience. Posting their work provided immediate gratification and enthusiasm, evidenced by the spontaneous grins that spread across their faces every time the ASA blog popped up with their entry. In fact, on more than one occasion one author (Janet) walked into the computer lab and observed children leaning in close to the computer, decoding and reading others' posts from the previous day.

At the end of each of their posts, children were asked to create "labels" (or "tags," depending on the blog site one uses). Labels allow the blog author to create searchable key words, an important component of Web 2.0. In essence, the labels become the *main idea* of the post. Though nearly all of the children in the After-School Academy had tested low in main idea and comprehension skills, when asked to label their posts, the children had little difficulty identifying their labels. Technology gave the students an authentic reason to identify the main idea of their post, and the LEA strategies allowed students to be successful in this endeavor, perhaps for the first time in their emerging reading lives. (To view the ASA blog, navigate to <http://ourasafamily.blogspot.com>)

Wikis

The word wiki comes from the Hawaiian *wiki-wiki*, meaning "quick" or "fast". A wiki is a website that anyone can edit, again without an understanding of HTML. The best known example of a wiki is wikipedia, which aims to document knowledge in an encyclopedia-type format. However, this knowledge is not created by a few select "experts" or editors, but by any user who visits a wikipedia page. Most first reactions to this information are rather negative, with the belief that inaccuracies are rampant. However, when compared to Encyclopedia Britannica, wikipedia has only a few more errors (Giles, 2005). Importantly though, wikipedia's errors can be corrected immediately so that subsequent users have access to correct information. Encyclopedia Britannica on the other hand must wait for a new publication date to correct any inaccuracies and still the errors remain on many shelves where old volumes sit (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). The reason that wikipedia can be so accurate is that hundreds or thousands of users who are passionate about a topic contribute to and monitor the wikipedia entry for that topic. Collective wisdom (Surowiecki, 2004) with communities that include traditional "experts" and passionate users establish high standards organically and the sheer volume of community members watching and discussing an entry creates an information flow that is unmatched by the small group of experts and editors for print-based media. The project explained below at Story Elementary School incorporated wikimapia (<http://www.wikimapia.org/>), whose tag line is "Let's describe the whole earth!" This site uses Google maps satellite imagery along with wiki functionality so that users can identify and describe any place on earth.

Wikimapia at Story Elementary

Two of the authors (Sheri and Julie) participated in a district-wide pilot program to integrate technology across the curriculum. Two inquiry-based, multiage third- and fourth-grade classrooms in a North Texas suburb participated in the pilot program and collaborated on ways technology could be used as an authentic tool to enhance the curriculum and literacy skills. Part of the social studies curriculum for this year included a study of the local community and "the lives of heroic men and women who made important choices, overcame obstacles, sacrificed for the betterment of others, and embarked on journeys that resulted in new ideas, new inventions, and new communities" (TEA, 2007). Working from a student's question of, "Why was our school named after Alvis C. Story?" the two classes set about to find answers. In this community, schools are named for important community figures, so researching a school namesake would clearly lead to important knowledge about the history of the community. However, this would be primary source research since no other texts were available on Alvis Story. Interviewing would be a major source of data collection and, while Alvis Story was no longer living, his son Chester agreed to come to the school for the interview.

Interviewing is a skill that many spend years learning and perfecting. Thus, students were given a mini lesson on interviewing based partly on the book *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* (Abel & Glass, 1999). Days before the first interview with Chester Story arrived, the students busily formulated their questions ranging the "Why was our school named after your dad?" to questions related to hobbies, sports, and favorite foods. There was a quiver of excitement as the day of the interview arrived. As Chester Story enthusiastically answered questions and told stories, the children took notes, and the teachers moderated and

videotaped. Later, Chester was joined by his sister June for another interview so students could learn more about Alvis Story. The children were now rich with experiences of the Depression era time period, the history of the community, and the life of our school namesake.

Meanwhile, students also were learning about the means with which the "Story of Alvis Story" could be published. Wikimapia seemed to be a perfect choice because the maps gave the students a sense of connection to the medium, and the wiki allowed students to authentically publish their work, creating powerful reading and writing experiences. When introducing wikis to the students, one student immediately worried that people might enter wrong or misleading information. The Giles (2005) study was described to the students, but to further clarify, one author (Sheri) used an example of something many of the children in the classes were both knowledgeable and passionate about, Pokemon.

"If you were reading an entry in a wiki about Pokemon, and you read some wrong information about Charmander..."

There was an audible gasp as several children said, "Not, Charmander!"

"You wouldn't like that, would you? Well, you could go into the wiki and correct the information right away, so that it would be correct. Because you care so much about Charmander and you know so much about Charmander, you would want to make it right."

While exploring wikimapia with the classes, we clicked on one of our local schools, Rountree Elementary. As commonly happens, the school was labeled as a compound word, Roundtree.

One author (Sheri) said, "Wait, I noticed something about Rountree's label. It's spelled wrong. I worked at Rountree once, and I care a lot about that school. A lot of people think it is spelled like a round tree, but it's not. I want to go in and correct the spelling of Rountree. I'm guessing the person who labeled Rountree really cares about the school or else he or she wouldn't even take the time to label it, but he or she didn't realize the spelling is not like a compound word. This person cared enough to label the school. I care enough that I want to make sure it's spelled right, too."

A student was navigating at the computer that was being projected, and one author (Julie) walked the student through the process of correcting the error while the other students watched it immediately change. We had a serendipitous learning moment in which we were able to authentically illustrate the care, knowledge, and passion of the "expert" user's knowledge and the way wikis can be organically grown and immediately corrected.

Working together, the children composed an entry about Alvis Story's life and watched it emerge on the wikimapia site projected on the wall as one author (Sheri) transcribed their words on the computer. Students brainstormed strong lead statements and then selected the best one. They also discussed the structure of the entry and then together vocalized the story. Many times, the authors and the students would reread the entry to edit and continue creating. In all, the experience took about 45 minutes. When complete, a small group stayed in from recess with another author (Julie) to post it on the World Wide Web via wikimapia. Extending the rereading, many students accessed the story from home and students and parents were able to publicly comment on the story. Honoring and capitalizing on children's experiences is part of what makes LEA such a powerful strategy. The collaborative and public nature of the wiki extends its potential through the potential of a larger audience pool. (To view the wikimapia entry, navigate to

<http://www.wikimapia.org/#lat=33.097725&lon=-96.658573&z=14&l=0&m=a&v=2&show=/1759693/>)

Conclusion

LEA 3.0 can be defined as combining the best of LEA with Web 2.0 technologies. The thoughtful and purposeful match of a tried and true literacy approach with an appropriate new medium has the potential to increase the powerful learning opportunities that exist in each alone. Combining LEA with Web 2.0 tools is a natural fit because each is creator based. LEA is creator based as it honors the language and thoughts of the emerging reader. Web 2.0 is creator based, with all users being offered creator status. Further, the combination of LEA with Web 2.0 makes the LEA experience deeper and thus worthy of a new release number, LEA 3.0. Specifically, LEA 3.0 broadens the audience of students' writing, which amplifies the organic and authentic nature of the LEA experience and invites additional opportunities for rereading that are not limited to the physical proximity of a paper text. Further, the fact that others can comment on students' writings draws the children deeper into their stories and extends the reading and writing experience. Importantly, this extension does not occur with LEA 1.0 or 2.0. Thus, the possibilities for LEA 3.0 are broad and diverse. For future experiences, the authors want to expand the use of other Web 2.0 tools to deepen students' engagement with texts they have created.

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