

**Best Practices: Using Popular Media for Active Learning:
Engaging Students Outside of the Classroom**

Abbott, Jillian ¹

¹ Queensborough Community College (CUNY)

Abstract: Creating engaging, interactive, online learning models may be a good first step to improving classroom success and possibly student learning outcomes. One way this can be achieved is by using SoftChalk, an educational software program that allows teachers to create user-friendly interactive lessons delivered via any standard web browser. The lesson discussed in this paper, “Eminem is Not Afraid,” engages students by recreating the experience of surfing the internet while guiding them through the stages of researching and writing a paper in a Freshman English composition class.

Teaching first year English composition, a compulsory subject at Queensborough Community College (QCC), can be challenging, especially when trying to engage a diverse student population with a wide range of prior educational backgrounds. According to QCC’s Fact Book 2011–2012, the student population of first time freshman at QCC in fall 2011 was roughly evenly divided between Hispanic (29%), Black, Non-Hispanic (25%), Asian or Pacific Islander (24%), and White, Non-Hispanic (21%), with the remaining one percent made up of American

Indians or native Alaskans. (Lackner and Fichera, 2011, p. 27) Over 100 languages are spoken by this diverse student body, with, “Over 39 percent of the fall 2011 freshmen speaking a language other than English at home.” (Lackner and Fichera, 2011, p.16)

English 101 is a compulsory subject and one that many students would rather not take, which makes engaging them in the course content doubly demanding. Technology provides myriad opportunities to engage this population. Randy Bass, among others, believes that “Technologies can play a key role here as new digital, learning, and analytics tools now make it possible to replicate some features of high-impact activities *inside* classrooms, . . . whether through the design of inquiry based learning . . . or redesign when and how students can engage course content.” (Bass, 2012, p. 26)

QCC encourages faculty to incorporate the use of technology pedagogy with a number of incentivized projects such as the Student Wiki Interdisciplinary Group (SWIG), a project that forms interdisciplinary virtual learning communities which collaborate online through the Epsilen platform and ePortfolio, and the now annual eLearning Institute, which trains faculty to teach online and partially online courses. Full time and part time faculty are encouraged to attend workshops and Teaching with Technology seminars at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Academic Computing Center. These include “Creating Micro Lectures with Camtasia,” Blackboard and SoftChalk.

This emphasis on technology pedagogy provided me with the opportunity to create a learning module using SoftChalk. SoftChalk is educational software that allows teachers to create user-friendly interactive web pages delivered via any standard web browser. It is easy to use, yet

allows educator to access the power of the internet to create engaging lessons, quizzes and interactive learning experiences.

Adding a technology component to a course such as EN101 not only enriches student experience but also embraces QCC's general education learning objectives, and, in particular, the objective to "use information management and technology skills effectively for academic research and lifelong learning," as stated in its Assessment Handbook. Elements of this objective include

- Determine the extent of information needed for a research question, problem or issue,
- Access needed information effectively and efficiently,
- Evaluate information and its sources critically and assimilate selected information,
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose,
- Demonstrate an understanding of the economic, legal, social, and ethical issues surrounding the use of information and information technology,
- Employ technology in research and fields of interest, and
- Identify the role of technology and its impact on the individual, society and the environment. (2011, p.38)

Much has been made of this generation's Web prowess, with terms such as "digital native" becoming so pervasive it is almost a cliché. A regular lament among faculty is that today's students won't read. Looking out at my classroom filled with students transfixed by their phones and other devices, it doesn't seem to me that young people are reading and writing less, it seems that they're reading and writing different. According to Apple development executive Jon

Landis, the current generation of college students is the most prolific writing generation ever. (Landis, 2011) However, as Dutch academic Dick Swart points out, “The Internet has created a new reading style. Today we are changing from a concentrated sustained and linear reading style into a more fragmented reading style.” (Swart, 2011, p.27)

The challenge in the classroom then becomes: How does one engage students in the literature one wants them to read and write about?

There is a wide variety of skill levels, technology experience and confidence among my students; however, a love of the Internet, social media, and music unites this divergent population. This seemed fertile ground.

The response I get when I ask students to read an essay from the text book is often the equivalent to what I might expect if I had asked them to read a passage in an unfamiliar, foreign language. I began to wonder if it was the medium itself that put them off. What if I gave my students the opportunity to read the material I wanted them to read using their preferred medium – browsing on the internet?

In trying to mimic this experience, I had to think through how information is uncovered on the internet. Swart refers to “WILFING” – What Was I Looking For, which he says “refers to immersive effects on the reader.” (2011, p.27) But the Internet is wide and deep and I wanted to keep my students within a certain universe of knowledge. Coincidentally, around this time I took a QCC Academic Computing Center workshop on SoftChalk and realized immediately that this software had the capacity to recreate the experience of surfing the Internet, incorporating multimedia links, while containing users inside a knowledge set of my creation.

Through my participation in High Impact Practices projects such as SWIG and because of the groundbreaking work of Dr. Jean Darcy, an Associate Professor of English at QCC and the founder of SWIG, and Dean Michele Cuomo, a founding faculty member and the person who serves as SWIG's ongoing administrative advocate, I am very aware of the learning advantage of a welcoming attitude towards the learned experience that students bring to the classroom. Awareness of the value of embracing prior student learning is by no means limited to QCC, for example, "No educator will be especially surprised to learn that success in a Web-based learning environment is heavily influenced by what the student brings to the learning situation." (Meyer, 2003, p.14)

The SoftChalk lesson I created is an attempt to take students by the hand and lead them through the process of reading critically, researching and writing a paper. Its success relies on the students' intrinsic love of and knowledge about how to find things out (research) on the web. It combines the experiences of surfing the net, listening to music, and learning about the artist, while simultaneously deepening the experience by adding the disciplinary knowledge of English 101. That disciplinary knowledge includes

- Interpreting texts critically
- using writing to create and clarify meaning,
- applying principles of critical listening to evaluate information,
- using analytical reasoning to identify issues or problems and evaluate evidence in order to make informed decisions,
- distinguishing the problem or question from a proposed solution or answer,
- differentiating between facts, assumptions, and conclusions in the formulation of a proposed solution or answer,

- evaluating the quality of evidence, and
- describing and comparing the way questions, issues, or problems are formulated within various fields of study.” (Assessment handbook 2010 p. 28)

By using the internet in this way and capitalizing on the preexisting learning preferences of today’s students, the lesson I created allows students to use the unique skills of the “Digital natives.” “There has been some research which asserts that growing up digital changes the way information is processed in the brain. But, what is even more intriguing is that these students also arrive with brains that are more likely to have been shaped by very visual, rapid movement, hypertext environments.” (Healy as quoted in Myer, 2003, p.15).

The SoftChalk learning module I have created allows students to pursue knowledge and learning outside of the classroom, alone, and at his or her own pace. “The Learning Paradigm frames learning holistically, recognizing that the chief agent in the process is the learner. Thus, students must be active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge. In the Learning Paradigm, knowledge consists of frameworks or wholes that are created or constructed by the learner. Knowledge is not seen as cumulative and linear, like a wall of bricks, but as a nesting and interacting of frameworks . . . In the Learning Paradigm, learning environments and activities are learner-centered and learner controlled. They may even be "teacherless." (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p.2721). This is not to diminish the role of teacher, but rather to see that role in terms of empowering the learner, or as Barr and Tagg put it, “While teachers will have designed the learning experiences and environments students use . . . -they need not be present for or participate in every structured learning activity.” (1995, P.2721)

The text I use in my English 101 classes is a collection of writings, mostly personal essays, entitled, *Across Cultures: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Sheena Gillespie and Robert Becker. For the SoftChalk learning module I begin with, “...well if you can’t hold the torch... then why pass it...,” an essay by Todd Craig. (2011, pp. 410–417) In this essay, Craig, a former JD, laments the passing of the golden age of Hip hop, the mid 1990s, and argues that Hip hop since has lost its meaning and become a litany of sex and drugs and money. (Craig, 2012, pp. 410–416) In my classroom, we discuss this piece and compare Craig’s sentiment to that of Tom Lee, author of another essay in the collection, entitled, “A Timeless Classic,” (2011) which, loosely speaking, argues that every era of popular culture produces a great deal of ordinary material, but that there are always those individual artists or works that rise above the ordinary and become timeless classics. (Lee, 2011, pp. 401 –404) The class discussion then turns to Eminem’s 2010 hit “I’m Not Afraid.” This song remains popular among most students, even though some either don’t like Eminem, that song, Hip hop, or even music in general. It is not unusual for my students to argue that “I’m Not Afraid” is destined to be a classic and that it proves Craig wrong because it is a song from the heart, both meaningful and inspirational, which was released in 2010, some 15 years after Craig’s “golden era” of the mid 1990s (Craig, 2011, p. 411). As time goes on, of course, my 17 year old freshmen have begun to argue that this song is an oldie from way back in 2010, thus proving Craig’s thesis that the only good music is old music (2011).

In any case, classes in which Hip Hop is the subject matter tend to be lively, with the students fully engaged in the topic. This seemed like great material to condense into a SoftChalk lesson which students could use as a study guide for writing their papers on this topic.

My SoftChalk lesson is entitled, "Eminem Holds the Torch." SoftChalk creates a website which is hosted on the QCC server. I then upload a single link for the entire Web site to Blackboard where students can access the lesson by clicking on the link. Once opened, the lesson works like an enclosed Web search where students can decide how far to delve into the lesson. The lesson begins with a contents page, which allows students to navigate back and forth through the pages of the module. Students click on the pages of the lesson that attract their attention. After a page with a photo of Eminem performing in Los Angeles, comes a page that contains a link to a PDF of the Craig essay. The rest of the page is full of prompts to get the student working and thinking towards the eventual paper. Drawing on Gillespie and Becker I ask students to think about questions such as "How does Craig portray the "golden era" of hip-hop?" (Gillespie and Becker, 2011, p.416). This prompt is placed under the essay so that they can spend some time thinking about Craig's argument.

If the student has already decided to do this essay, or if their interest is piqued, they can progress deeper into the Web site to the next page which contains a link to the lyrics of "I'm Not Afraid" and another link to the official music video of Eminem singing the song. I've included further prompts, such as asking the student if there is a difference in the experience of reading the lyrics rather than watching the song performed or if the student thinks Craig would approve of the song.

The next four pages contain links to some of my earlier students' responses to this essay. In these essays, the students compare the Eminem song to another song that they believe either proves Craig's thesis (Hip hop is over), or disproves it. Each of these pages has the YouTube

video of the song to which each student compares and contrasts the Eminem song embedded in it.

The next page contains a PDF of the Lee essay and several prompts to get them thinking about it, followed by an article on writing about music and a quiz on that article. Students are then directed to a page of links to critical essays on Hip hop and Eminem. If the student is on campus or logged into the QCC library, the links are live, taking the student to the full text article in the library data base. The final page contains the essay prompt from *Across Cultures*, which asks the student to choose a current song, album, or music video that he or she thinks will transcend popular culture and become a "classic." In addition, the student is asked to write an essay explaining why their selected song will accomplish this feat. When framing the argument, students are advised to think about the historical, sociological, and personal arguments used by Lee and Craig in their essays and told to apply a similar long view to their own essays. (Gillespie and Becker, 2011, p.216)

The SoftChalk learning module is set up so that students who want to learn more about the subject can move deeper into the website, uncovering more information with each click. The particular topic was chosen because each semester I received more reading responses and essays on Craig's essay and Eminem's lyrics than any other topic from my EN 101 students.

In the low tech class version of this lesson, I hand out the "Not Afraid" lyrics, which were read before class and held a follow up discussion in class that examined Eminem's writing style, his target audience, how his biography plays into the lyrics, how his work relates to others in the field, and in music history, etc. This discussion takes place with the back drop of the Craig and Lee essays.

The class discussed both texts, considering whether Eminem qualifies as a true artist or a sell-out, as defined by Craig's terms. They also address other issues Craig raised in his essay.

The goals in creating a SoftChalk website to upload to Blackboard are to engage students in discussion and analysis, hone their critical thinking skills, and enhance their relationship with language in order to give them an appreciation of the continuing relevance of the essay form. The Web site is designed to encourage students to explore this topic and to generate the desire to research it further and articulate their results, and improve their writing skills in the process.

Because music is of central importance to my students, this lesson allows me to use their love of music to increase language skills while also showing that music is an important form of cultural expression? Examining music through lenses such as critical essays on Rap and Hip hop, biographical interviews, interviews focused on the creative process, alongside the actual lyrics and musical performance, should also build on their prior knowledge.

So far the students who chose to write their responses and essays on this topic displayed an extensive knowledge of Eminem and other artists, their life, their music and the place of the work of individual artists in the spectrum of Hip Hop, Rap and Rhythm and Blues. This gives the lessons the added appeal of validating students' prior knowledge, or, as stated in QCC's General Education Objectives, it uses "writing and oral communication to connect prior knowledge to disciplinary discourse." (Lackner and Fichera 2011)

Although I have not had the chance to formally evaluate student responses to this lesson, anecdotally it seems to be appreciated by the students. They point to the inclusion of the songs' lyrics and the other students' papers as the most useful aspect of the lesson. I plan to develop a survey examining student use of this module and eventually make a comparison between a class

that uses this model and a control group. The ability to do this relies on scheduling of two EN 101 classes in the same semester, however. Despite using this learning module being a solitary experience for students, it does allow them the opportunity to interact with the material and expert opinion on the material (through the critical articles), which seems to bear out Myers view that, “. . . if there is one strong area where the Web is used to consistent effect, it is by making ample interaction feasible, including students interacting with the course material, faculty or other experts . . .” (Meyer, 2003, p.16.

Meyer talks extensively about the opportunity that Web-based teaching offers students for interaction with faculty, experts and fellow students. (2003) The module I created lacks the capacity for interaction with peers, but in the future I plan to link it to a Blackboard discussion board, allowing students to discuss the module online and participate in each other’s learning processes.

I agree with Swart that “Due to hours spend on the Internet we have attained a new reading style that can be described as more fragmented, intuitive and associative,” (2011, p.27) and believe that leaning modules like the one I have created are welcoming and structurally familiar to today’s students. Swart describes a phenomenon he calls WILFING – What was I Looking For, “which he says refers to immersive effects [of the internet] on the reader.” (2011, p. 27) My SoftChalk lesson provides an environment where today’s students can learn, explore, questions, evaluate and finally write.

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