Addressing Digital Literacy in the English Language Class

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Conducting and reporting on a group project is a common assignment in many university courses. Project work simulates the working world, requires critical thinking, and gives students responsibility for their own learning. We have found that assigning group research projects in our academic English program energizes our students, engages them in meaningful work, and creates an authentic environment in which to use their English language skills. On the other hand, locating information and using it effectively in academic reports is a new experience for most of our students. Today, when even experienced researchers report being overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of information that is available to them, it is no surprise that our students are confused about where to begin. They often build their projects by cutting and pasting texts from the Internet into both their written and oral reports without a clear picture of whether the information is credible or relevant and how they should use it. We have learned that in order to ensure a quality product from their group research projects, our students need assistance with their *information literacy* and oral communication skills.

In a paper presented to a United States Presidential Commission twenty years ago, before computers were widely used in educational settings, the American Library Association characterized people with information literacy this way:

> Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

Information literacy instruction refers to a shift in focus from teaching specific information sources to a set of critical thinking skills involving the use of information. Since the advent of widespread computer and Internet use, specialized terms referring to electronic forms of information literacy have emerged, including *digital literacy*, *Internet literacy,* and *visual literacy*. They all refer to understanding how information is organized and how to locate, evaluate, use, and document it. Today, lecturers in academic English programs frequently find it necessary to devote instructional time to reaching digital literacy, Internet literacy, and visual literacy. They all refer to understanding how information is organized and how to locate, evaluate, use, and document it. Today,

lecturers in academic English programs frequently find it necessary to devote instructional time to teaching digital literacy skills. Some of the problems our students have encountered in managing information include an over dependence on search engines, inability to judge appropriateness of articles, and copying of sources which results in plagiarism. Their oral presentations frequently show a lack of attention to the impact of visual information and feature the copying and pasting of written material into PowerPoint presentations. We have found the following resources to be useful in addressing the need for improved digital literacy and oral presentation skills in our students while engaging them in collaborative project-based work.

Using Wikis

A wiki is a web tool that allows students to compose, revise, and "publish" information as a group. It functions like a website but with access limited to members of the team and their lecturers. Students use their wikis to comment on their peers' summaries, essays, and reflections. A wiki is a good tool for fostering collaborative writing and serves as a virtual meeting place. This is especially useful in situations where students have difficulty meeting face to face.

Our students have reported that they start writing earlier in the research process with the use of wikis. They were often able to edit their short research notes and wiki comments and incorporate them into their final research projects. They also realized that they did not have to e-mail their work to each other because it was stored online. As their instructors, we found that using wikis enabled us to ensure that everyone was working cooperatively and collaboratively.

Using Webography

One means of helping students learn how to evaluate online materials is to give them pre-project assignments in choosing and evaluating online material. We asked our students to build a *webography*, that is, a web-based bibliography. This task allows them to explore an area of interest while practicing website and text evaluation skills before they need to apply those skills in their own research projects. The assignment followed a classroom discussion of evaluation criteria and a demonstration showing how to apply such criteria to selected sites. Students choose topics, find sites, evaluate them, and post their evaluations on wikis so that their information could be shared with other students.

Language learners need considerable help in learning to prepare effective, informative oral presentations. In recent years, oral presentations have become even more complex as speakers commonly integrate words and images. This can present an opportunity for language learners who have background experience or aptitude in visual or digital media, but it can also present an added challenge for students of limited English proficiency who

must locate, interpret, and effectively integrate images into their oral presentations. The resources listed below have proven to be valuable for our students.

Using Online Videos

There are several popular online video-sharing portals that appeal to students, one of which is *YouTube*. Using *YouTube* videos has generated a lot of excitement in our classes, but more important, it has helped students improve their oral presentation skills. YouTube video clips are short which makes them easy to download. We found several that were specifically designed to teach oral presentation skills including these:

- Presentation Pitfalls: How many errors can you find?
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXILI9Q1jIw&feature=related

- Death by Powerpoint
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqzvb8ELACg& feature=related

- Enhancing your Presentation Skills
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whTwjG4ZIJg&feature=related

Another useful website that lecturers can utilize is Technology, Entertainment, Design, commonly called TED at http://www.ted.com. This site makes freely available over 200 short, 18-minute talks by some of the world's greatest thinkers and most talented individuals. We asked our students to review three presentations from TED and to observe a number of features such as interaction between the speaker and the audience and the projected images used by the speaker to enhance his or her talk. Afterward, one student commented that:

> The three videos have somewhat brought to light my realization regarding my unorthodox method of presentation. I've reflected on my past presentations and have therefore realized that my method is not that feasible to convey the right message to the audience. Professionalism and delivery is very important to get across the whole audience as to much digression and lack of flow in presenting will divert the audience from the point of the presentation itself.

The videos enabled us to break the monotony of the lesson and led to greater student participation in classroom discussions.

Using Other Online Resources

The advent of the Internet age means that teachers have a plethora of resources that would have been unimaginable twenty years ago. Students are particularly receptive to the use of Internet sources that they are able to access and review at any time. Other advantages of using these resources are that lessons preparation time is reduced and class time is used more effectively. We spend less time explaining how to make a presentation and more time showing how. For example, the focus of one lesson on visual literacy sensitizes students

to how text elements and colors can be used to increase the effectiveness of PowerPoint presentations. For this lesson, we also use the notes and slides on visual literacy from the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) website (http://owl. english.purdue.edu/) including Visual Rhetoric, Color Theory, and Using Fonts with Purpose.

Using Online Appraisal of Peer Presentations

Many of our students request some sort of model oral presentation to follow, and we oblige (somewhat). It is not our intention to provide a model for them to copy directly. Instead, we choose to have students watch their peers' oral presentations online and join in an online discussion about them. We uploaded videos to an online student portal. Students are encouraged to look at general points about the presentation (attention to audience, amount of information, etc.), design of the presentation (background, font size, image position and size), and choice and consistency (color, icons, broad and relevant range used).

We showed students video clips of authentic presentations and gave them key guidelines to focus their attention. They were able to identify salient characteristics in the short reflection that they wrote at the end of the activity. Among the observations made by students were these:

Student 1:   I noticed that it is highly essential for a presenter to maintain eye contact with the audience. Moreover in a formal presentation it is necessary for a presenter to be familiar with the slides and should avoid referring to notes.

Student 2:   The slides should also have good color schemes so that when audience look at the slides it would not be too jarring for the eyes or too light for the audience to see. Slides should also not be cluttered with too many words, as it will distract the audience.

As shown in the quotes above, students were able to identify qualities of a good presentation by watching their peers. The activity enabled us to shift the focus of the lesson from trying to "train" students by providing them with a prescriptive list of *dos* and *don'ts* to having them view presentations much as an instructor, or better yet, a real audience would. This enabled students to consider the effectiveness of their own presentations from the perspective of their audience.

Conclusion

The group research project that we assign is a rigorous one (see Appendix). However, the tools described here have helped our students with both products of their projects— their written reports and their oral presentations. They are more successful in locating and evaluating information and are making better decisions about how to use it. In other words, the use of e-learning tools is contributing to improved digital literacy, which will help them not only with their university life but also in their future careers.

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Appendix
Group Research Project

Component 1: Written Report Component

At the end of the project, students will produce a report. The final report is a collaboratively written 2500-3000 word research report. The word limit excludes references, citations, and accompanying captions for tables and diagrams. It constitutes 50% of the group research project grade.

Students will be assessed on the:

- Clarity of purpose
- Integration of research and prior knowledge
- Coherence
- In-depth development of main ideas
- Evidence of creativity and/or fresh insight

The report must:

- Include in-text citations and references
- Be clearly paginated
- Be typed, double-spaced in Times New Roman 12 point font or near equivalent

Component 2: Oral Presentation Component

Two weeks after submitting their written group research project report, students will give an oral presentation in the presence of an audience. The oral presentation will be based on the group research project. Two lecturers will assess the oral presentation. The oral presentation makes up 50% of the group project grade.

Students will be assessed on:

- Clarity and fluency of his/her presentation
- Confidence in delivery
- Ability to engage the attention of the audience
- Ability to respond to questions about the project

Groups will be allocated one hour for their oral presentations. Each student is expected to speak for approximately 5 minutes individually and then to participate in answering questions posed by the assessors. Presentations may also include video clips, slide shows, skits, and so forth.