New E-Tools in Teaching Writing under the Umbrella of Literature

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Abstract

This paper commences with a discussion of stereotypical problems of teaching writing, such as: students' lack of ideas, weak language and the like. It then spotlights the role of technology in facilitating the teaching process and highlights the interplay between teaching writing and studying Literature. Novels, plays, poems and different literary texts greatly assist in enriching students' language plus widening their mental horizon. The writing process comprises a number of stages; i.e., brainstorming, vocabulary listing and proofreading. Numerous Web 2.0 e-tools – Wall wisher, Wordle, Penzu, etc. - are provided with relevance to each step, supported by factual examples within the context of literature to validate the main issue and confirm the value of integrating technology in writing classes. It is evident that most learners enjoy their online collaboration, free from the constraints of time and place in the regular classroom. They share, gain more knowledge and become more productive. Some case studies from college classes are presented   as a tangible evidence of the effective impact of technology in enhancing learners' output and blending learning with fun. Podcasting, social media tools like twitter, you tube, blogs and wikis have all aided to enhance learners' comprehension of the chosen texts and raise the quality of their writing.

Keywords: writing- technology- literature- brainstorming- vocabulary- proofreading- blended learning- online collaboration- suggestions.

1. Common Problems

Teaching academic or creative writing is quite challenging for multiple reasons. Some students feel blank and unable to handle the assigned topics. They may "lack confidence" or "think it's boring or believe they have 'nothing to say'" [1] .They may not be also able to expand or develop their ideas. The distinction between general and specific details is sometimes opaque to them, which reduces the quality of their output. Low language proficiency   is another factor that hampers the flow of their thoughts.

Poor language or limited vocabulary significantly impacts their expression of ideas. Additionally, plagiarism is quite pervasive among students nowadays to meet deadlines and exert minimal effort. Thus, writing for them ends by being just a matter of cut and paste, with no creativity nor mental effort from their side.

2. The Role of Technology in Writing Classrooms

Implementing ICT in the classroom is currently widespread. The incorporation of technology can greatly assist in overcoming the aforementioned list of problems. It leads to diversity of activities as learners are exposed to a limitless number of educational resources, games and tasks. Meanwhile, they have more fun and become more independent and engaged in the learning process. Using "internet-based' project work like web quests to build the writing habits "encourages cooperative learning and therefore stimulates interaction" [2] . Still, some potential snags or challenges should be handled to get the optimum. Technical problems top the list. Having a sudden internet disconnection or an out of order computer can disturb the lesson. Teachers should always have an offline, contingency plan to save the situation. Online activities can be time-consuming as well. Off-campus chores can lessen the amount of time and effort in class. Additionally, roles should be properly and equally divided to ensure the participation of all learners and force lurkers or reluctant students to share.

3. Literature/ Writing

The interplay between developing writing as a skill and studying literature is so vivid. Literary texts can develop learners' mentality and inspire them with novel ideas. They can also enrich their stock of vocabulary and enhance their language competence. Additionally, reading literary texts develops critical thinking, along with the ability to judge, evaluate, compare and contrast. Accordingly, the examples provided are mostly related to literary texts to point out the significance of such a relationship to improve learners' written production.

4. Stages of the Writing Process
4.1 Brainstorming

It is the very first step to "generate ideas and stimulate thinking" [3] . Students freely jot down ideas related to the chosen topic, using such techniques like listing, clustering- writing ideas in a visual map- and free writing. Focus is thus on writing whereas organization and correction come later. Most teachers are familiar with such a traditional format of brainstorming:
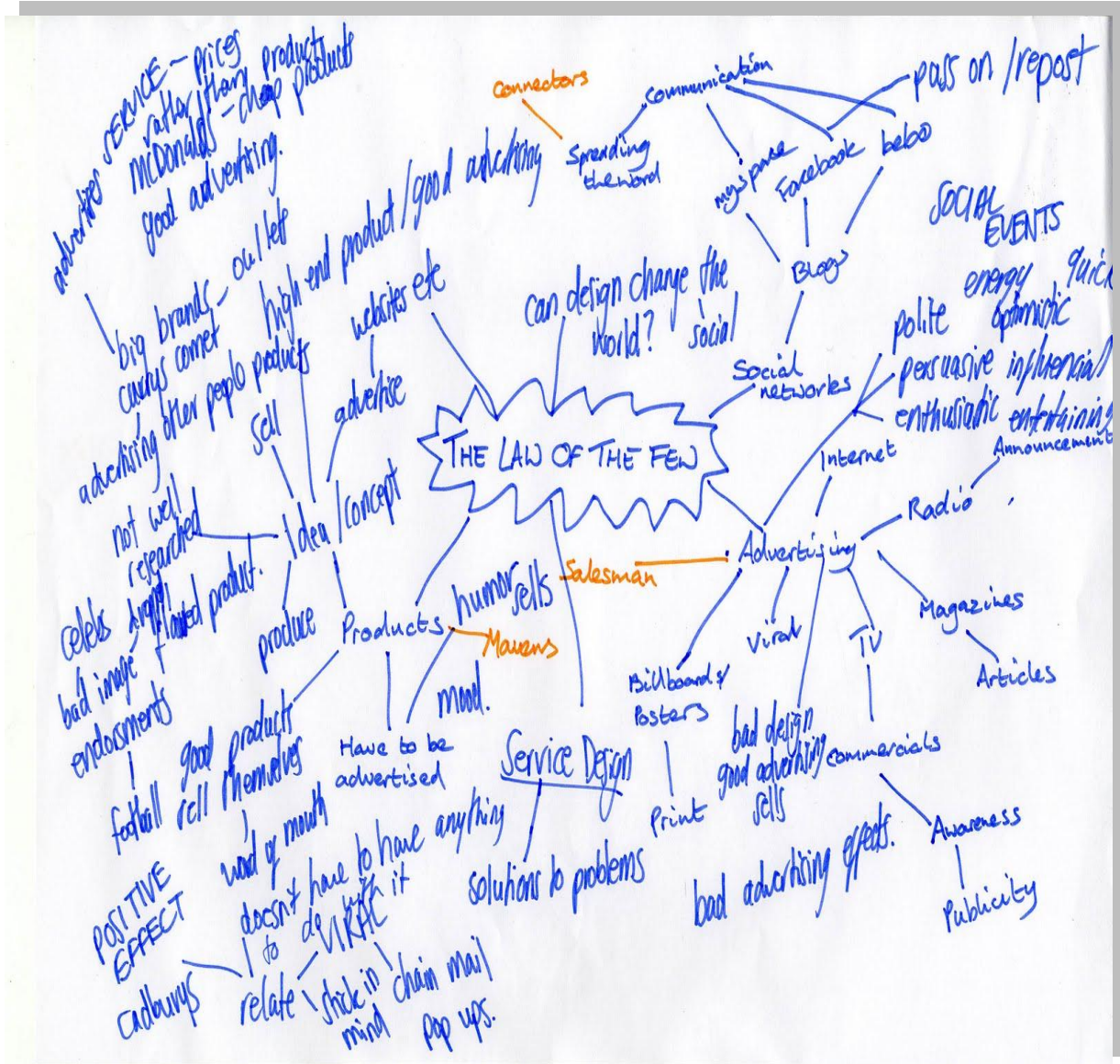

Figure 1: Example of traditional brainstorming

New electronic tools can be utilized to facilitate sharing ideas:

- **Eyeplorer.com is** a visual brainstorming tool that inspires learners with a treasure of ideas.
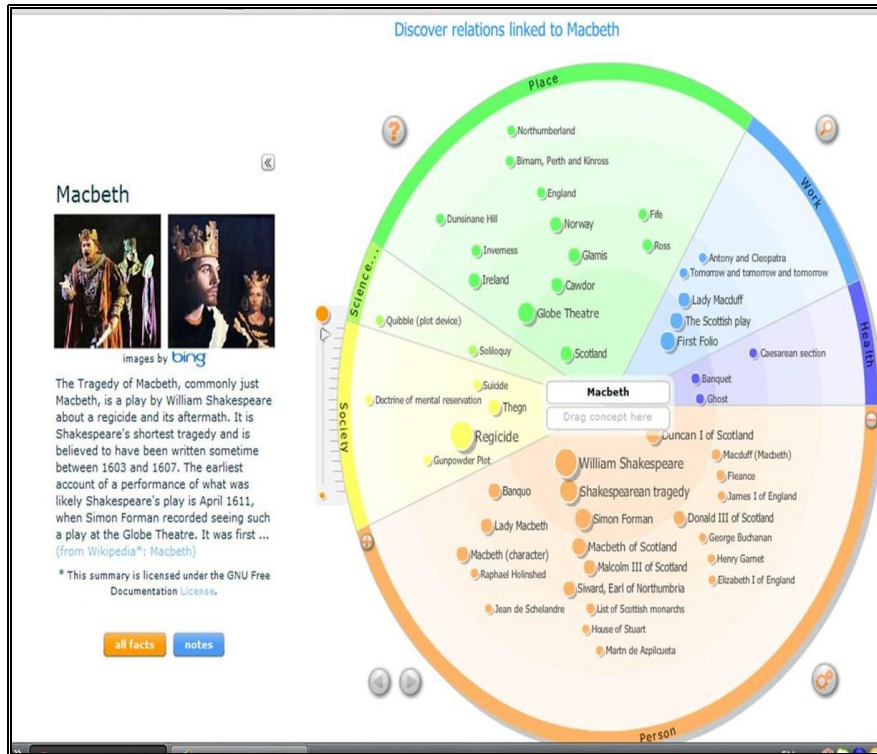

Figure 2: Example of a task related to the figure of Macbeth. [4]

- **Wall wisher** is another electronic wall to post ideas, sound files, images, etc.

Figure 3: Sample of a wall created by learners about 'happiness'. [5]

- **Tricider** is a voting site that opens the discussion of a topic with a question, to be answered coupled with points to justify:
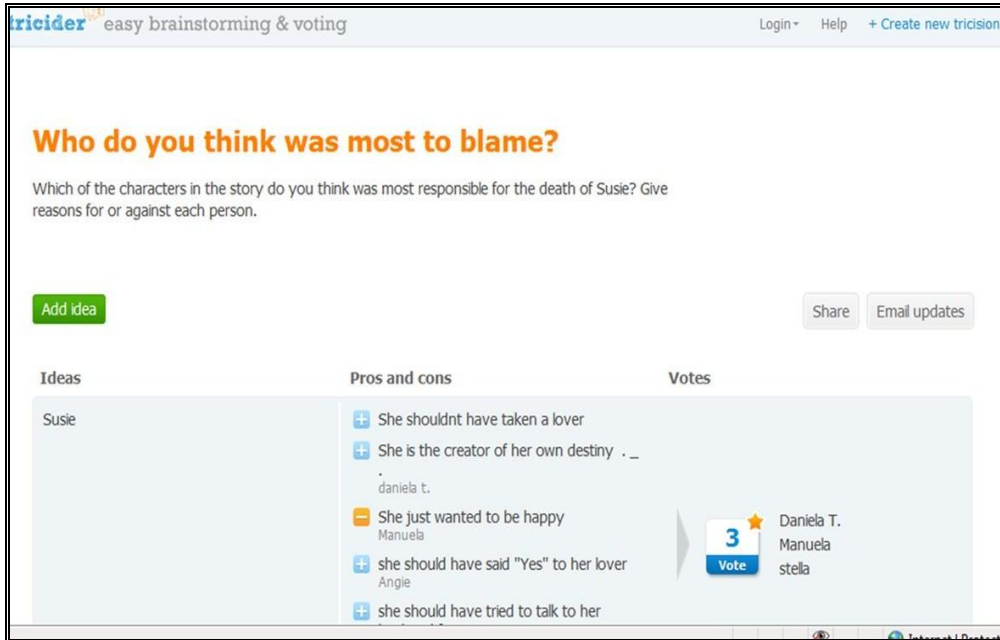

Figure 4: A voting task about novel ending. [6]

4.2 Enhancing Learners' Vocabulary

While many learners complain of their lack of ideas, others suffer because of their low language competence. Their limited stock of vocabulary hampers the flow of their ideas and undermines their confidence to practice writing.

Numerous e-tools can be highly beneficial for them:

Wordnik is a visual dictionary that provides the target lexis' connotations and different meanings. It can enrich learners' vocabulary via providing multiple definitions, supplemented with examples.
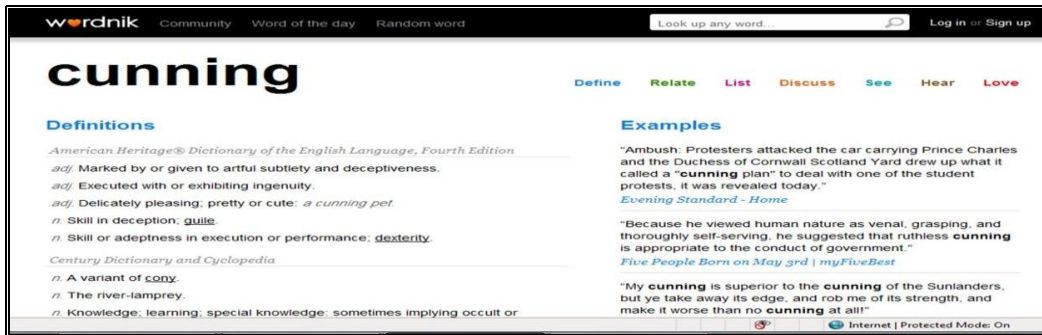
Figure 5: An attempt to define 'cunning'. [7]

- By using **Wordle**, learners can create word clouds, or anagrams to represent new expressions, summarize plots, or character traits and revise connotations and collocations of new words.

Figure 6: A project about Macbeth's traits as a tragic hero. [8]

4.3 Writing/ Proofreading via Technology

Editing or proofreading is an essential part of the writing process to "reflect on what (learners) have written" [9]. Students usually tend to make mistakes out of lack of knowledge or carelessness. Having a second reader to check grammar, punctuation, word coherence and cohesion can assist to detect these errors to correct and gradually render them less liable to reiterate them. One way to reduce written errata is by learners' collaboration in a free writing task, using electronic journal. **Penzu** is a simple online tool for creating a personal journal. The journal entries can be shared by email or can be printed up and brought into class.
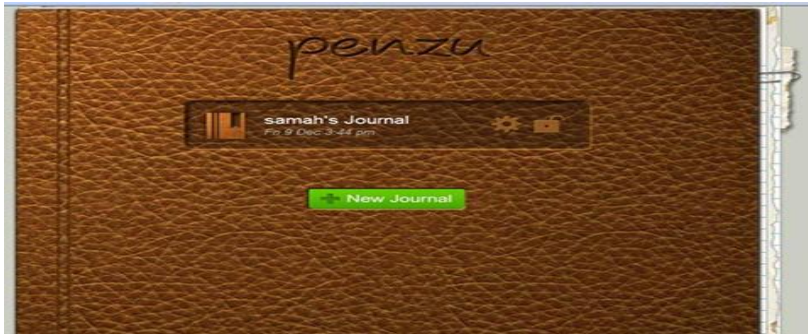
Figure 7: My journal created for my writing class. [10]

The teacher can also create a class **Wiki**, via pbworks or wikispaces, to assign pair or group editing task. S/he can provide online F/back and comment on salient errors in class, which saves time and leaves ample room for collaborative language practice.
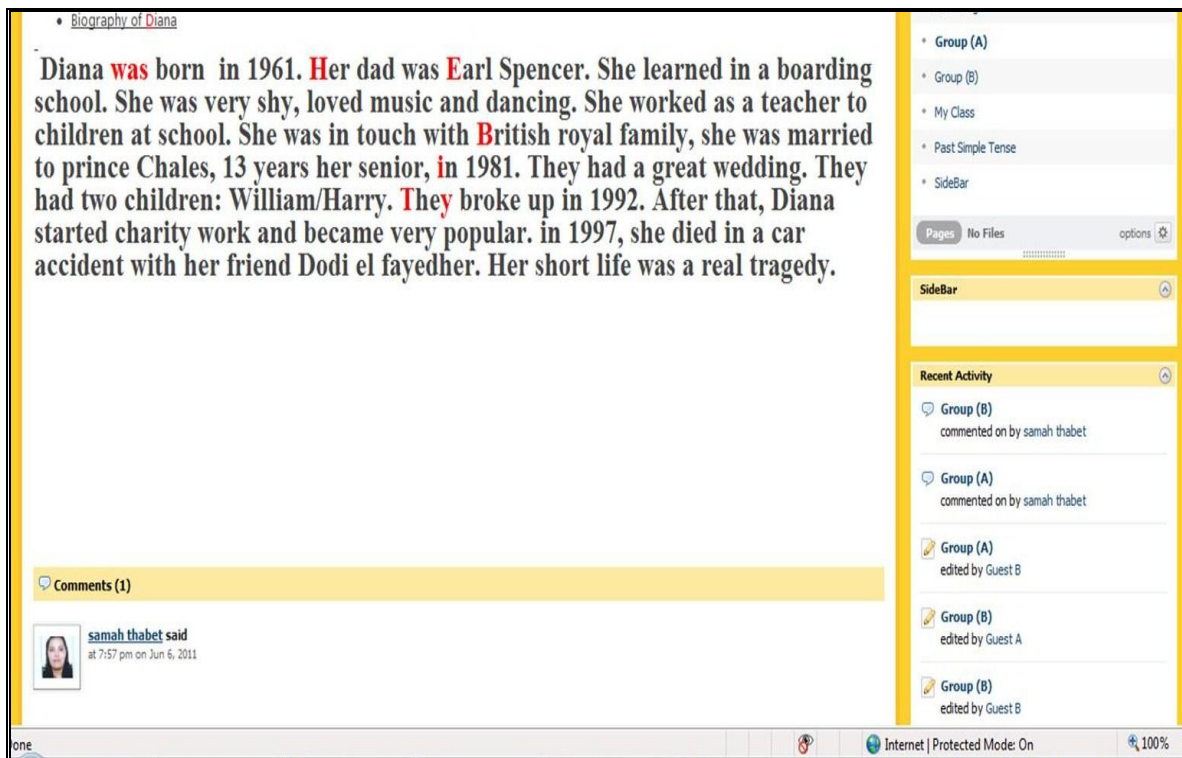

Figure 8: Example of a writing task performed on my class wiki. [11]

5. Using Technology in Teaching English literature (personal experiences)

Experience 1:

Using Power Point Presentation (PPT) in a literature classroom proved to be effective. Viewing plays or movies for more than 3 hours is not always very conducive as not all students could watch the movies or plays. PPT was prepared for important scenes in the movies and plays (***King Lear, Pygmalion and A Passage to India***). Students watched only key parts of the play or novel instead of the whole thing. Such an experiment was less time-consuming and more intense.

Web resources used:

- http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/episodes/king-lear/watch-the-play/487/

(The above link was used to teach important scenes from Shakespeare's famous play ***King Lear***.)

- www.youtube.com
- http://video.google.com
- www.keepvid.com for movies.
- www.yappr.com for plays.
- Audio books

Experience 2:

Of all the genres of literature, **Poetry** is the most difficult to teach. Recitation is the most important part of teaching poetry. Websites like (***www.librivox.org)*** have a very good collection of poems in audio version, recited by the native speakers. It is a portal where anybody can upload their recitation and it is free to download. This motivated students to sing poems, record them and upload to the site. Sound editing software like **Audacity** was used for recording and editing recited poems. This program is a freeware and easily downloadable. Poems recorded there can be converted into mp3 format for mobile phones and shared among students for listening.

Experience 3:

A twitter poll (**http://twtpoll.com/**) was used to collect opinions about an interesting topic like a character or the author's views. After a study of point of view and character development, students chose one of the fictional figures and created a twitter account ex: @pip, @estella, etc. They used their

study of that character to create conversations around key events in the plot. They actually created their own fiction based on their knowledge of the writer, the time period, and the characters.

Experience 4:

After learning critical theories, students were asked to read recently published novels by contemporary writers. Students read novels by Chetan Bhagat, browsed the blog on which readers had given various comments on the text, and then they were asked to give their comments on the blog (www.chetanbhagat.com).

The writer, Chetan Bhagat, used to read these comments and attempted to vindicate his stand. The students learned to understand the text from various points of view, including the writer's. They also applied several critical theories on the text. Students were throughout attracted to blogging and websites because of the glamour attached to it.

5. **Suggestions for Teachers:**

Implementing blended learning in literature classes can be quite rewarding and enjoyable. It widens the horizon for learners to exceed the boundaries of time, place and text to create a virtual world of their own. Still, teachers should be very selective to choose tools appropriate to learners' level, the chosen text and the task. Short-term as well as long-term goals should be clearly stated from the outset to meet the time limit. An orientation session should be held at the very beginning of the course also to save time and effort and familiarize learners with the tools implemented.

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