



The Digital Domain: Using Today's Technologies to Inspire Engaging Classroom Experiences

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Although initially reticent, high-school art students readily embrace the “old-school” communication medium of postcards, eventually integrating modern technologies and social media into the project.

The Digital Domain: Using Today’s Technologies to Inspire Engaging Classroom Experiences

It was my second year of teaching photography in a midwestern high school setting, and by that point in time I had grown accustomed to my students’ fascination with broadcasting their lives to the world. Regular discussions concerning Facebook, Twitter, and their monthly competitions regarding who sent the most text messages using their unlimited data plans were commonplace within my classroom walls and beyond. For a long time, I looked at these practices as typical teenage behavior. When I was in high school, talking on the phone after school was the thing to do. Students today have a technological edge and have simply taken it to the next level... simple, right? What was I thinking?

SARAH CRESS

After enough time had passed and I had grown out of my beginning teacher pants, I acquired more time to observe and make inquiries regarding my students’ desire to regularly publicize their personal sensibilities. More often than not I would get the typical responses: “It’s what’s cool now.” “Everyone else is doing it, why shouldn’t I?” “I’ve had it for a while, why not keep it up?” I further discovered that in most cases, students were spending several hours a day in front of their home computers typing commentary detailing their own personal occurrences, responding to peers’ feeds, and uploading media to social networking sites (Cress, 2009, p. 8). After several of these casual conversations, I began to consider my own personal reliance on technologies and how that dependence has evolved over time. What began as a simple call to a close friend on the home phone eventually turned into my very first conversation holding the brand new bag phone my father placed inside the 1984 Chevrolet Jimmie I drove to and from school. From that large Motorola, I branched into instant messenger in college, which finally culminated into my beginnings in Facebook my junior year. Thinking about this technological timeline, I began to realize that, like my adolescent students, I too had fully embraced technology as a

common reliance. Today, if my cell phone dies in the middle of a road trip I feel naked to the world. The primary difference between my experience and that of my high school aged clientele, however, was the fact that I had witnessed what the world was like pre-social networking.

This desire to regularly maintain ties with others is a normal feeling for most, and not solely secluded to techno savvy teens. Rice (2009) writes extensively of the power of connection through such interactive websites as Facebook.com. He notes that, “Connection is the very core of what makes us human” (p. 28). Connection and the need for connection through friendship and companionship has been a long-standing human need that can be traced back to the beginning of mankind. Of course the manner in which such connections come into being will evolve just as our communities change and mold with the times. Some call today’s students ‘digital natives.’ Prensky (2001) writes, “Today’s students—K through college—represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the



By Nicole, former student.

digital age” (p. 1). Prensky goes on to say, “Our students today are all ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (p. 1).

It is because of this new technological way in which our students live their daily lives, that many of us, some coined ‘digital immigrants,’ sometimes struggle with accepting these new forums for connectivity. The reality is students have become so closely intertwined with these online personas, so much so in that they represent much more than a need to chitchat over a crush. Student’s technological practices have the ability to highlight very real sensibilities and create wanted identity. Boyd (2007) notes regarding the comparable site MySpace:

A MySpace profile can be seen as a form of *digital body* where individuals must write themselves into being. Through profiles, teens can express salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret. They construct these profiles for their friends and peers to view. While what they present may or may not resemble their offline identity, their primary audience consists of peers that they know primarily offline—people from school, church, work, sports teams, etc. Because of this direct link between offline and online identities, teens are inclined to present the side of themselves that they believe will be well received by these peers. (p. 13)

Over time, use of such sites can become common practice, particularly among younger clientele, in many ways, posing as a stage in which participants perform regularly for their followers. Rice (2009) notes,

Being always-on reinforces the belief that an invisible entourage follows us wherever we go. Our nonstop connectivity ensures we are always within reach of someone, at least technically, and at least in a way that might cause us to act differently than we would if we knew no one was watching. For example, our status updates are like personal headlines that we post to let others know what we are thinking, feeling, and doing. (p. 142)

Rice goes on to discuss that because of the hyper connectivity that such sites as Facebook encourage, we—as relationship starved beings—have become more concerned with how our existence passes from second to second instead of actually living within the present. The over-powering reality among younger generations who have been born into the social networking domain is that little difference is seen between real-world identity and online identity. Rice notes that, “for a growing number of people—especially those from younger generations—‘community’ is not understood as a dichotomy between ‘real’ or ‘online’ relationships, but as a composite of both” (p. 170). It is thus crucial that more consideration be placed when taking into account how younger generations now equate these two means of existence.

Howerton (2009) writes specifically of teens and their online livelihoods:

With the rise of restrictions on physical freedom, digital publics that formed through social networking can provide an important avenue of communication, socialization, and connection for teens who are all too often kept from these identity tasks in person. Social networking, then, provides a niche online that can act at their “third space.” Traditional face-to-face contact is replaced with online presence and helps with identity formation... By and large, teens’ online lives look very similar to their offline lives. Their use of social networks to collaborate and socialize is not unlike the ways in which teens of the past used malls, parks, backyards, and basements. (p. 8)

Considering my students’ real-world and online-world needs to create a sense of community, as they strive to impress themselves and one another, I began to contemplate ways I could incorporate their desire for continuous connection within the art classroom space. Simultaneously, I wanted to help them realize the similarities and differences between online and offline connectivity. Among my regular denial of having a Facebook account out of sheer fear that my students would discover photographs of me on vacation, I realized I was doing more harm than good. By denying my own personal need for “third space” interaction, I was pushing against a very real and genuine phenomena inherent in my students’ lives. Although I did not grant students easy access to my own online persona, I did share my evolution of technologically driven socialization, and spoke to them about the importance and appropriateness of stepping back from current trends and trying “old-school” methods to communication in addition to newer approaches. While such discussions helped my students discover the relevance of maintaining feet in both the digital world and the real world, they also helped *me* discover the various dimensions that explain online teen practice. Students were not simply following the activities of their peers in a casual manner; they were utilizing online forums as a means to augment existing friendships and continue practicing intrapersonal relations. Students utilized

spaces like Facebook as a means to document their life stories, to continue conversations that began face-to-face, to find new friends with similar interests, to touch base with old friends that had moved on to college, and so on. I began to realize that my students’ online personas were indeed mimicking their real-world encounters. While as an instructor, this may have seemed strangely redundant, I was beginning to come to terms with the fact that today’s students are growing up with an understanding of how such forums can be used in productive and meaningful ways. I had joined the bandwagon and began to brainstorm instructional approaches to help both my students and myself explore new media practice and how such interactions mimic previous intrapersonal actions.

As a community of learners, we decided to begin our explorations by going back to the basics, in this case, the written word. My students rendered this as a proper beginning, based on their regular written feedback via online social media sites. We looked extensively at the history of letter writing. We then looked closely at postcard imagery, considering the regular practice of placing photographs to adorn social home pages. We all reminisced of our elementary days when many of us had a pen pal from a neighboring town. From those initial investigations and explorations stemmed the Artist Postcard project. I teamed up with my former cooperating teacher from my student teaching experience, Susan Gleason, and we planned our first exchange. Students would be tasked with designing postcards fabricated by their own artistic vision with the added inclusion of a personal note—a seemingly simple task that would take place every month, after which her students would respond to my students’ representations.

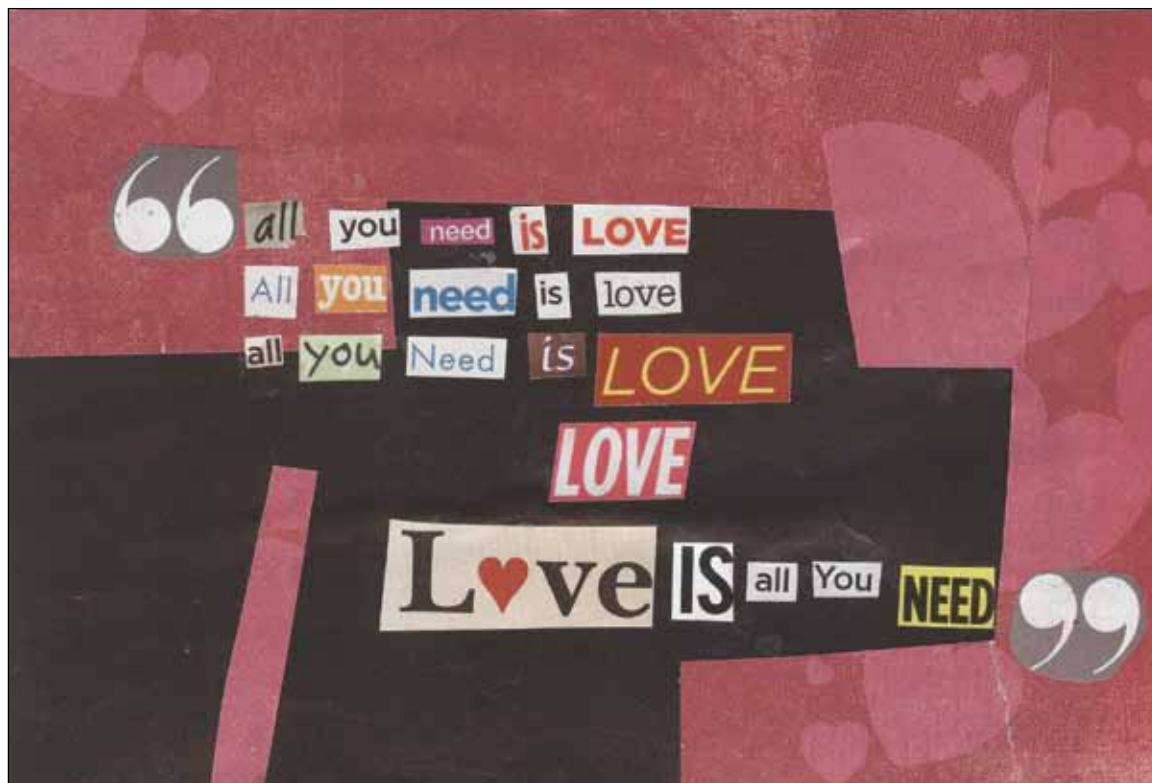
At the very beginning my students were skeptical, to say the least. They created their works quickly with little consideration to subject matter or craftsmanship, as they severely disliked the idea of parting with their own works of art. I found it necessary to provide students with prompts to get them started in their artmaking. It was not until they received their responses from Susan’s class that the light bulbs went on. Within those responses, Susan’s students shared intimate details regarding their lives and asked follow-up questions regarding my

students’ introductory notes. It was during this first reading that my students realized these were real human beings with real interests, real goals, and real minds. From that moment on, my students began to take their postcard work more seriously, now having the realization that a living and breathing person was on the other end of the mailbox. Although students would experience this phenomenon of friend formation while in the real world and also online on a regular basis, it was this project that seemed to slow time, allowing students the opportunity to truly appreciate the act of forming a relationship. This I find significant among an age in which technology continues to accelerate the ways in which we live and breathe.

After several months of postcard delivery, I noticed the continuation of fascinating events.

1. My students were beginning to take their other studio assignments more seriously. Just as students were beginning to put more time and effort into their postcard pieces, they also began to place more stock into their more time-consuming assignments. Students no longer seemed to be producing works solely to hang on their own bedroom walls and seemed to lose the original narcissist manner in which they created. They finally realized that making art for oneself was not the only way to enjoy their creative nature. They began to take the suggestions of their peers and myself more seriously during preliminary critique and were pleased to see their work hanging in the showcase outside our classroom. My high schoolers were finally thinking and reflecting like artists. With this growth in artistic thought, students became much more thoughtful practitioners. In the beginning I felt forced to provide vague prompts to motivate students to create. As time went on, students were brainstorming and creating unique works of art by entirely their own creation.

2. They began to write more thoughtfully. To write was a regular occurrence within the photography classroom, and for quite some time it remained a chore for students. Many struggled with the task—not only technically, but creatively as well. Although I would comment regularly on their writing abilities, I did not notice a



By Rebecca,
former student.

Such discussions... helped *me* discover the various dimensions that explain online teen practice.

true difference until our first month of postcard exchange. It seemed that having a sense of unknown readership pressured my students to push themselves in terms of their written abilities. They took their time in drafting their commentary, brainstormed salient questions and proofread their work several times prior to submission. One student who took considerable time to draft her first postcard message wrote the following:

I am so glad to finally get to send you my first postcard (So I haven't been working on it for an imaginary being). I am a senior in high school and I am so excited to go on to college. Even though all this hype about finding the right university is making me anxious, I find comfort from all of that through music, reading, drawing (and more affectionately) photography. I hope to make it in this world as a photographer. What do you want to be when you grow up?

This was a student, who previously, would submit one-sentence journal entries during our daily writing prompts.

3. **They respected their artist postcard partners and valued their insights.** After the preparation of our second batch of Artist Postcards, I prepared them for mailing and left them in our main office for pickup. Not long after this initial delivery students began to incessantly ask, "Have our postcards arrived? When can we get them? Where are they? Have you heard from the other teacher?" The anticipation to hear back from their partners was tremendous. Once one batch arrived, students would take considerable time studying the visual art presented and reading and re-reading their peer's response. Often times, students would attempt to read in-between the lines, hypothesizing how far in the art program their partner was, whether they were an honors student, if they would pursue art in college and so on. My students were beginning to critique other's artwork in

meaningful and constructive ways, while also gaining a great respect for the written word.

4. **They began chatting with their new friends online.** It was around the third batch of Artist Postcard creation that I began to overhear students talking about their partner's imagery online. I discovered soon after that a majority of my students had searched for their partners on Facebook and were now connected virtually. At first, I couldn't help but feel a moment's panic, worried that once students had found each other over the Internet they would no longer see the value of the Artist Postcard project. This was precisely the opposite case. I found that my students looked to their partner's Facebook page as a supplement to their handwritten correspondence. Susan's students would write about college visits and concerts and my students would promptly search for the pictorial evidence of those events. Never once did the postcard form lose its appeal. In fact, many

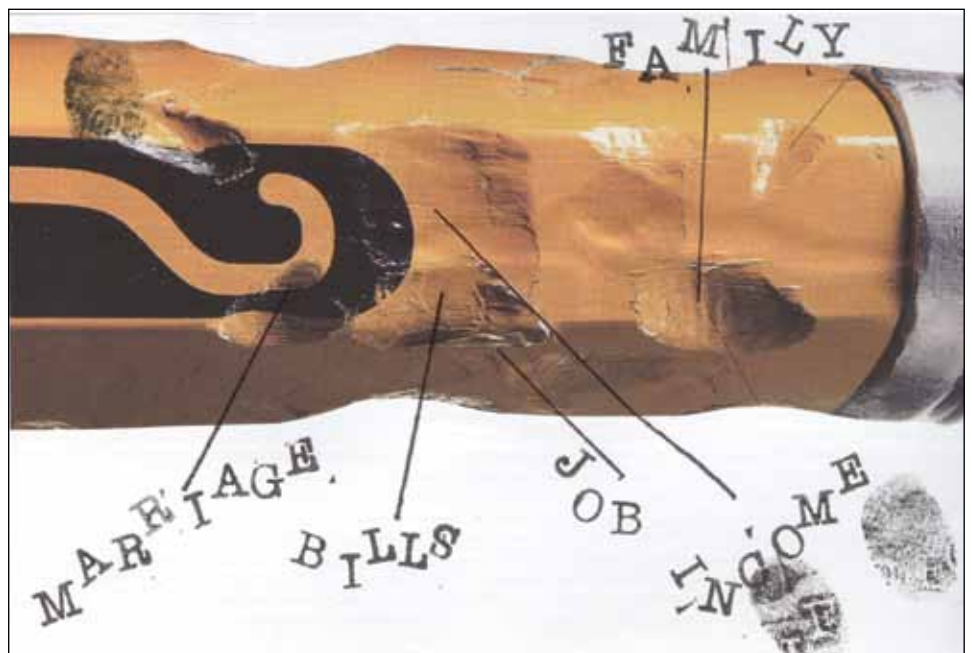


of my students expressed their sincere appreciation for the works exchanged over time. One student noted, "This is the beginning of my own personal art gallery. The best part is, each piece was made just for me."

Following these observations, I prompted a candid discussion with students concerning their means of communication. Through this discussion, I helped students realize how their online patterns of identity formation so closely mimicked our handmade encounters. The same time and focus they placed into the creation of an online interactive persona could also be applied to a unique work of art and accompanying written response. The primary difference between the two dynamics was simply a selection of media.

For me, the Artist Postcard project, which originated with a simple curiosity on my part, continues to be validated today. Proof of its ability to engage students in thoughtful personal reflection and independently creative output was discovered in the following 3 years of its integration in my own curriculum. Validity also manifests in those other instructors with which I have connected through my own correspondence, who have also embraced the concept. For all participants, the Artist Postcard project goes beyond simple mailings; it serves as a contemporary discussion of how we as

Our students have already taken their giant leap toward innovation... now it is our turn.



Images on these pages are teacher examples.

humans communicate and how past practice informs today's interactions. The digital age is here to stay and as educators, we can utilize this modern day phenomena as inspiration when revising and creating new curricula. O'Sullivan (2000) notes:

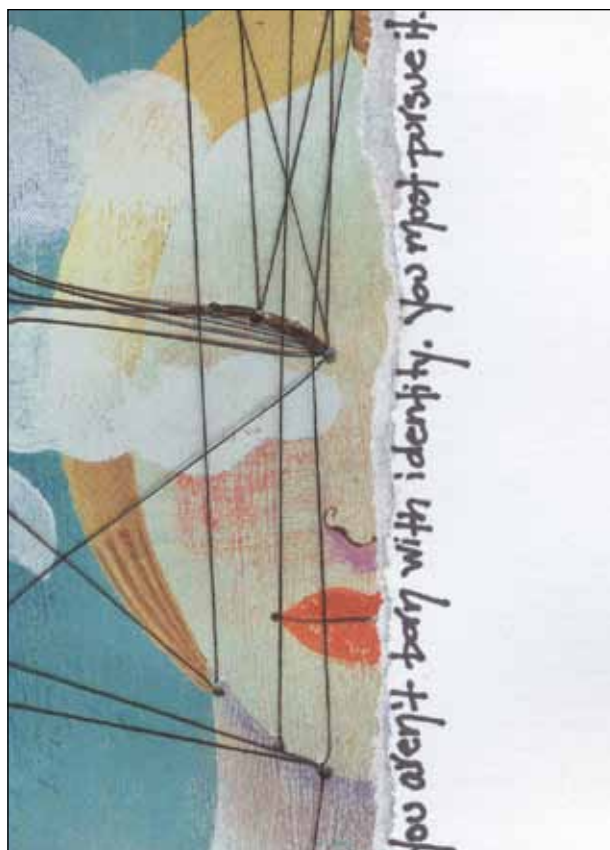
Individuals are not hapless victims or beneficiaries of autonomous technology—they can make choices about how to use various technologies' characteristics. In this view, individuals have the ability to evaluate various technology options, select the one perceived as best suited to their goals, and use the technology's characteristics in ways that further those goals. (p. 56)

For my students, the discussion of contemporary technologies became the catalyst for an inherently beneficial and enjoyable artmaking experience. A casual conversation between just a few students exploded into the Artist Postcard project and continues to engage a growing number of teachers and students in explorations concerning how we, as socially dynamic beings, continue to explore avenues for enriching intrapersonal skills.

Hostert (2010) notes:

It becomes increasingly clear that the 21st-century art educator needs to not only infuse the art curriculum with media rich experiences, but also to guide students' use of these digital tools and promote their critical understanding of the world through learning activities develop interpersonal communication and problem solving skills. (p. 90)

Housing simple conversations and continuing to make art in its traditional sense, while also comparing prior and emerging means of communication and creation, will be the starting point for many educators interested in investigating the current trends in students' lives. Our students have already taken their giant leap toward innovation with little to no hesitation; now it is our turn.



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