San Diego high schoolers created public health presentations recently using a high-tech collaboration with counterparts from across the world. Students at Kearny High’s School of Digital Media and Design worked with students from Daraja Academy in Nanyuki, Kenya, via video-chat and online messaging to craft health information for real audiences in their respective countries.

This collaboration is just one example of the ways writing instruction is changing today—an illustration of what is possible, thanks to new technological innovations and an emphasis on making writing relevant. This type of instruction stands in contrast to more traditional methods: students using a pre-set writing structure develop a research paper, for instance, which they draft by hand before inputting into a computer and delivering to an audience of one: their teacher.

“A lot of what we see in the classroom in terms of older styles of instruction is writing that is often stilted and oriented toward a type of writing that is exclusively K–12, as opposed to being relevant for what is happening outside the middle school and high school classroom,” says Heather Lattimer, assistant professor at the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego.

Today’s students, whether in English or other core subject areas, need to be prepared for college and career positions that require 21st century writing and thinking skills. The digital revolution is putting powerful mobile devices and a repertoire of free and affordable Web tools into more and more classrooms, while the new Common Core State Standards emphasize writing in new ways and promise online assessments of students’ writing abilities.

These factors are changing—and will continue to change—how writing is taught in the coming years, presenting both challenges and great potential for improvement.

The Impact of Technology on Writing

Touch-screen tablet computers like the iPad have been on the market for little more than three years, yet have been quickly adopted by consumers and brought into many classrooms. They are just one example of the rapidly changing technological landscape that has transformed many aspects of Americans’ daily lives this past decade—from smartphones in more than half of all teens’ pockets, according to Nielsen research, to the ubiquitous presence of the Internet.

Yet, notes Lattimer, too often teachers don’t know what to do with these tools: how best to employ them with students and take advantage of their unique strengths.

“I see too many classrooms where we’ve gone in and adopted iPads and laptops on a one-to-one basis—and they are being used as expensive paperweights, because we are not sure how to engage students with them,” she says.
One issue: when students are able to use computing devices that provide easy access to information via the Internet, the teacher’s role in the classroom changes from being “the primary source of knowledge in the classroom to more of a coaching and guiding role,” says Heather Lattimer, assistant professor at the School of Leadership and Education Sciences, University of San Diego.

“For many teachers, that’s a difficult transition. They may end up using new tech tools as enhancements to traditional education—pumped-up word processors rather than powerful communication devices. “We are still in kind of a ‘print then upload’ model,” says Kathleen Blake Yancey, professor of English at Florida State University and a former president of NCTE. Yancey says too often, teachers view computers and other technologies as ways to help students with, say, spelling and grammar, but miss greater opportunities.

“Technology will get you different ways of sharing your ideas with different kinds of audiences, and that’s what can make writing really come alive,” says Yancey.

As in the case of the Kearny students, writing with technology can mean more easily collaborating with others and sharing works online, such as through social media. By communicating with “real” audiences, students feel as though their writing makes a difference, and are more motivated. Students also learn how to make constructive criticisms of others’ work in shared versions, says Lattimer.

Writing collaboratively, she points out, is an expectation in the professional world, so it’s necessary for students to master it.

**Tools That Help Students Focus on the Bigger Picture**

Another benefit of using computers comes when students are allowed to compose directly, rather than handwriting first. When students can use computers for direct composition, this can improve writing, because revision is made easier, tools such as the thesaurus are handier, and students are using a medium they find more engaging.

“I work primarily with kids who struggle,” says Lattimer. “If they have to write it out longhand, most of them want to say they are done [early], especially if crossing something out means you have to rewrite the whole thing.”

Students today can use not just desktops or laptops for writing, but also tablets and even smartphones. “I’m amazed at the number of kids I see composing paragraphs on their phones, which is certainly beyond my capability,” says Lattimer. “They can go back in and edit with so much greater ease.”

While some teachers may be uncomfortable with giving kids spell-check and grammar aids, Lattimer argues that having these tools helps students focus on the bigger picture: learning how to put words together in effective ways.

“Some students are so focused on, ‘Am I spelling it correctly? I have so many things to hold in my head at the same time!’ that they struggle to write effectively and get their ideas out there,” says Lattimer. “If the computer can help with that, more power to it.”

Recognizing the emergence of digital writing, the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s 2011 Writing Assessment...
Assessment for the first time required students to use computers. 50,000 8th and 12th graders were given laptops for testing and allowed to use such tools as spell-checkers and the thesaurus. The assessment found that those students who were most familiar with electronic writing tools and used them during the test were more successful. Those with lower scores also were less likely to have access to computers in the classroom or at home. (Overall, only about a quarter of students wrote at proficient levels.)

Technology’s Potential

Arthur Applebee, professor of English at the State University of New York at Albany, along with colleague Judith Langer, researched writing instruction extensively from 2006 through 2010. Applebee found that schools are not making use of technology’s potential.

“Technology is being used for traditional presentational pedagogy,” he says, “so it’s the teacher’s PowerPoint, the teacher’s materials on the Internet, and very, very little use, with wonderful exceptions, of writing to foster collaboration and dialogue.”

Lack of access to technology also remains a problem in many schools, he says, with students not having one-to-one use of computing devices, either because there aren’t enough to go around or because schools fear letting students get used to using word processors when high-stakes exams still require writing by hand.

At the same time, online environments and hybrid classrooms are becoming more common, especially at the college level, and also are changing student writing.

“Most universities are making extensive use of online media, such as Blackboard and WebCT, to facilitate at least a part of what’s happening in the classroom,” says Lattimer. “Students need to be able to effectively navigate through that communication.”

Multimedia Writing: “The moviemaking is the writing”

Another way technology is altering writing instruction is through the integration of audiovisual tools—not only adding pictures, animations, or video clips to written documents, but creating movies as a way to communicate with an audience.

Bump Halbritter, an assistant professor at Michigan State University, has been teaching multimedia writing courses for a decade. He is author of a new book, Mics, Cameras, Symbolic Action: Audio-Visual Rhetoric for Teachers (Parlor Press, 2012).

Halbritter’s students create documentaries, homages, and “remix” pieces (repurposing online clips) in order to communicate; indeed, says Halbritter, “the moviemaking is the writing.”

He also brings more traditional writing into his classes by requiring students to write detailed project proposals as well as post-project reflection papers.

Benefits to multimedia writing, says Halbritter, include collaboration—he calls film an intensely collaborative process—and learning the importance of revision (re-editing is frequently needed). Students, especially those creating documentaries, learn to think critically, ask questions, evaluate sources, and communicate effectively.

In another example of multimedia or “multimodal” writing, engineering students in the Writing Across the Curriculum program at the University of Minnesota participate in global teams to create collaborative documents filled with multimedia and shared with specialized and lay audiences, reports Yancey. “That is the composition of the future.”

Yancey taught a graduate class in visual rhetoric last year that gave students the choice of creating a paper or a webpage. More than half chose the webpage—a surprise to Yancey, who had only one student choose the webpage option when she taught the same course two years ago.

Yancey thinks students may now be picking digital modes more than print because the tools are easier, students increasingly know how to use them, and they appreciate “the power of this mode in terms of their ability to share it with other people. If they do it in print, it’s coming just to me. If they do it on the Web, it can go anywhere.”

At younger grades, however, Applebee found that multimodal writing in ELA classes remains rare.

“There is very little [multimodal work] going on in the traditional English classroom right now,” he says, with more frequency in middle schools than in high schools.

“Kids know how to insert videos and music into their word processing documents, but they don’t necessarily have a lot of opportunities where that’s being valued in the relatively traditional focus of instruction. The one new school genre is actually the PowerPoint, which is probably being overused.”

Teaching Thinking = Teaching Writing

More important than teaching students how to master specific sites, software, or other tech tools and skills, says Lattimer, is teaching students how to learn.

“We don’t know all the ways now that kids will be expected to communicate in five, 10, 20 years from now,” says Lattimer. “We need to teach kids not just the medium or the genre or the particular form, but how to navigate and manipulate structure and form in order to fit with your purpose and your audience.”
This means, too, that students need to know more than restrictive formulas, such as the five-paragraph essay, cautions Lattimer. “When I talk to my colleagues, one thing I repeatedly hear is, ‘We have to teach our incoming freshmen how to unlearn the five-paragraph essay.’

“So many students are simply going in and applying a formula as opposed to being able to communicate a message, an idea—and that is the crux of what all writing is about: having an idea and being able to communicate it effectively for a clear audience and a clear purpose.”

**How Will the Common Core Affect Writing?**

The Common Core State Standards call for more writing, especially in content areas such as science and history, but how this will play out depends on implementation and how the upcoming assessments are structured.

“It depends on whether writing instruction is looked at from a more authentic approach or whether it becomes more of a drill and kill,” says Lattimer. “If it becomes something that is standardized-tested to the point of, ‘Do you know how to put together a sentence? Can you identify the topic sentence of this paragraph?’ then it’s not going to be the rich kind of embedded, discussion-based literacy and writing instruction that is needed.”

Applebee concurs, noting that—while he likes much in the Common Core—the grade-by-grade standards are so formulaic that they risk becoming “a boilerplate that you know is going to turn into drill in many contexts.”

The Common Core does have the potential to foster cross-content collaboration, says Yancey, suggesting that, for instance, a course in American literature could be taught alongside a course in American history and focus on texts such as Lincoln’s Gettysburg address.

The Common Core also suggests literacy tasks be distributed so 50 percent are among ELA teachers and the other half among teachers of other subjects, says Yancey. It remains to be seen whether or how this will occur.

After all, cautions Applebee, past efforts to support writing across the curriculum often have been interpreted by subject-area teachers “as a favor for the ELA instructor”—and then get “crowded out” in the face of competing curricular demands. “It has a long history of not working.”

Assessments could be key to reversing this trend: if tests in non-ELA content areas require more writing, then those content-area teachers are likely to provide more writing instruction, says Applebee.

“The Common Core is certainly written to highlight the responsibility of individual disciplines and writing in the disciplines. Whether it plays out that way either in exams or practice, we just don’t know.”

Yancey agrees, noting that the Common Core “is really a wild card” at this point in time, making it difficult to predict what will happen to writing instruction at K–12 in the coming years.

Higher education, on the other hand, has a more easily predicted future; Yancey expects that collaborative writing will increase, as will multimodal writing and writing for “real” audiences.

“We will see more writing where students are creating authentic texts for a real public to read, where they’re explaining something to members of a specific discipline and to a lay audience.”

Though not yet at the higher ed level, students at Kearny High School are an example not only of learning via collaboration and technology, but also of learning to write for a “real” audience. The high schoolers learned that they had to tailor their public health communication to their audience. For the San Diegans, an online presentation viewable by an Internet-connected public worked well. The Kenyans, on the other hand, found that few members of their intended audience could be expected to go online, so those students developed in-person skits to deliver their message.

Fully integrated digital technology tools offer great potential for improvement in writing instruction. Teachers who can make successful use of these new tools and teaching methods will be able to provide their students the benefits of greater collaboration, mastery of 21st century skills, and the ability to create rich and relevant writing.

Lorna Collier is a freelance writer and author based in northern Illinois.

**Quick Thoughts**

Kathleen Blake Yancey and Bump Halbritter were among those snagged by a NCTE staffer with a video camera at the 2012 CCCC Convention in St. Louis. In these short clips Yancey talks about why public support for education matters, and Halbritter explains how he has used audiovisual compositions to empower student writing.

Lorna Collier
http://tinyurl.com/apzvsxr

Kathleen Blake Yancey
http://tinyurl.com/b697fwr

Bump Halbritter