According to Neil Postman: “Nothing is more obvious than that a new technology changes the structure of discourse. It does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence, and by demanding a certain kind of content.” Although we as a society (for the most part) are excited about and still discovering what the Internet means to us in terms of information exchange, those in the educational community are much further behind in trusting technology within curriculum. Yes, the Internet offers an endless amount of information for our students, but is it quality and how will our students be prepared to know the difference between the meaningful and the useless?

With the recent popularity of wikis, a web-based collaborative piece that allows users to constantly revise and publish their own content of a subject or project, I have become interested in their uses in the classroom. My project of inquiry would revolve around researching the use technology in classroom instruction, via the Internet and wikis, in literature lessons to enhance comprehension with my fourth grade students. My ultimate question of inquiry would be: *Can wikis replicate the results of authentic discussion and/or discourse for measurable comprehension or learning of assigned literature?* One problem that I would ultimately encounter is: Do wikis act as virtual discourse or is it just information without connection? I believe that this problem would easily answer itself within the first few entries of the wiki. It would become very apparent whether the children were actually understanding and building upon the information presented by others or if they were just adding on a sentence or two to make it seem like they were contributing.

For my inquiry project, I would ideally start up right at the beginning of the school year. I would need to teach the students the procedures for editing and processing within the wiki and how to access and hyperlink content. This sounds extensive for some fourth graders, but many come in knowing much more about computers than we can ever imagine! My usual method for teaching our curriculum’s stories happens over the course of a week in the following format: discuss new vocabulary words that will be encountered in the story, read story together as a class, discuss story as a whole group, read story as small groups, discuss as small groups, read story in pairs, complete comprehension activity, read story final time individually, take a comprehension test. However, in trying to find out a wiki’s most successful placement for optimum comprehension, I would replace any discussion after the whole group interaction with wiki submission. Thus, the small group interaction and the comprehension activity would be technology based. I would still conduct the whole group discussion because I do not wish to eliminate every aspect of discussion altogether. I want to just observe whether the students can extend upon and show understanding of what we start together as a class. Any discourse that the children would have with one another (without my guidance) about the story would take place via the wiki. The children would have access to classroom computers, school lab computers, and home computers. Following the wiki’s
format, they would have the opportunity to establish positions about the story, question others’ content and submissions, and revise overall content until the class was happy with the finished product. I would then test student comprehension through multiple choice and short answer tests and compare the scores with the averages of the previous classes. The students would also be graded on their involvement in the wiki.

Another major problem that I haven’t quite resolved in my thinking about this sort of inquiry is: How would I exactly document and compare comprehension? There are basic ways to reveal comprehension: test scores, presentations, reports, etc.; but none of those tools are reliable in their own right, whether you are dealing with paper and pencil methods or computers. A single test score cannot fully dictate whether or not a student actually comprehends a subject matter. I believe that my best resolution in this circumstance is to monitor much like Vivian Paley. Observe, interact, monitor, record, keep in constant connection with how the students are performing and then reflect. My own reflection would be the best tool that I would have to control this type of inquiry. Through my reflection, I would be able to decide if the students were gaining the most from this type of technology and whether it was worth the time. Also, reflection will allow me to keep in mind that we all “learn along the way” as Mary Catherine Bateson has shown through her inquiries. I will be able to take what I have learned along so far as an educator and blend it with what I will learn through this inquiry.

Although I am very interested in using technology in my classroom, I still feel leery of its lasting implications. According to Lowell Monke in the article Charlotte’s Webpage: Why children shouldn’t have the world at their fingertips, children show great enthusiasm toward computers and technology and “the medium is so compelling that it lures children away from the kind of activities through which they have always most effectively discovered themselves and their place in the world”, such as recess and similar social interactions. I know that through test and trial with computers and Internet in the classroom, I will be able to come up with a workable hybrid of discussion and technology, but I still question how much technology is taking away from teaching kids how to truly interact and cooperate with their peers. Monke also writes that he “repeatedly found that after engaging in Internet projects, students came back down to the Earth of their immediate surroundings with boredom and disinterest--and a desire to get back online.” I feel that reflection and an open mind will keep my inquiry valuable. I want to make sure that I am able to keep kids “connected” with the new technologies of the world, but I don’t want to be an accomplice in their “disconnection”.


From the choices of the ten different sites in *Inside Teaching*, the first website that I clicked on was Sandi Gilliam’s *Learning Mathematics in a Community of Inquiry*. I believe that I was initially drawn to its thumbnail for its mention of “inquiry” in its title. I was pleasantly surprised when I started exploring the site. The format of the site was very “user friendly”. Everything was clearly labeled and the content was easily navigated. I appreciated the lack of clutter (I am very particular about the benefits of “simple”, not distracting, sites) and the clean appearance. Everything was organized sequentially and she even gave detailed description on the opening page as to where certain aspects of interest could be found under certain labels.

Aside from a technical standpoint, Gilliam’s website was very extensive. Beside various videos detailing each aspect of her teaching method, she wrote a thorough explanation for what each video contained or illustrated. This allowed me as a visitor to know exactly what I was about to watch and what to expect. Gilliam included videos detailing her instruction from the very beginning of a semester with the introduction of rules and her expectations about performance in class and grading particulars. This not only shows how she operates a classroom, but what it looks like to watch her in class as a student would watch her. I believe that this format is very important in allowing someone “inside teaching”. A viewer or visitor is not only told what is going on, much like many teacher resource books and many websites, but they are shown how the teacher presents initial lessons that build the foundations of the classroom. I can vividly remember reading and hearing over and over as a student and beginning teacher to “establish rules and expectations with the kids” right at the beginning. And although I have finally figured out how I want that to sound to my kids in the first few days of class, I was never able to actually watch a teacher do this with his or her own class like Gilliam did. Gilliam lets people “in” on her class, and that is a very valuable resource for any teacher.

Another aspect that I feel helps a visitor to be “inside” Gilliam’s teaching is her use of actual copies of the lessons. I was able to click on the images of the textbook and read exactly what the students were reading and being taught. This again reinforces the idea of *everything* being laid out for a visitor and allowing them “inside” the lesson.

The most important part of Gilliam’s website for me was the segment of personal reflection that she video taped following her *Malls vs. Meadows* lesson. The video shows her talking directly to the camera and her audience while she reflects on the lesson that she just gave. She tells how she felt the lesson went, what she would have done differently, and what she will do to follow-up. This was very different from “commentary” that a visitor can usually expect from a video-based presentation. Gilliam’s reflection was made directly after the lesson and was thus truly authentic. It allowed me to know exactly how she was feeling right after giving the lesson. It wasn’t something produced “from memory” for the benefit of adding it to the site to enhance the experience. This again made a wonderful impact on my trip “inside” Gilliam’s teaching.
In conclusion, Gilliam’s site, aside from its technical appeal and extensive content, was an excellent example of technology’s ability to take one “inside” the teaching of another. She offered thorough explanation and useful examples of her methods that allowed me to feel familiar with her methods by the time I was finished with the site. I believe that her site is exemplary of what *Inside Teaching* is trying to accomplish within the educational community with technology.