**New Technologies to Get Your Students Engaged**

By Ryan Cordell

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Anyone who's squirmed through a painfully dull PowerPoint presentation knows that technology does not equal better pedagogy. When technology is used for technology's sake, it can obscure rather than illuminate—and distance us from our students rather than connect us to them. For a particular tool to help you connect with your students, it must serve the pedagogical aims of your classroom, rather than the other way around. Fortunately, I have found that technology can serve a variety of pedagogical aims while allowing students to engage with one another, with their teachers, and with larger academic communities:

**I want my students to conduct research using primary sources.** Every year more digital archives publish historical books, magazines, newspapers, letters, tracts, maps, photographs, audio, and film. Delving into those archives allows students (nearly) direct access to materials that were once available only at colleges with extensive special-collections libraries.

For instance, I've asked students in my 19th-century-literature classes to research historically grounded projects using the Library of Congress's [Chronicling America](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov) project, an open collection of historical American newspapers. Rather than resorting to broad claims about "life back then," students substantiate historical claims about our literary texts with evidence from newspaper articles contemporaneous with the book they're studying. My students have also used the Google Books and HathiTrust archives (see list of resources on following page).

Texts aren't the only items archived online. This year Google released Google Art Project, which allows students to explore artworks from museums around the world "at incredible zoom levels." Finally, there's the Internet Archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)), which comprises not only texts but also video, audio, and even an archive of the Internet itself. These are only a few of the biggest archives; there are online repositories of primary materials from any number of fields. Let your students dig into them to get a taste of real research.

**I want my students to organize their work.** Whether they're digging through historical archives or researching secondary sources, students need a way to organize what they find. [Zotero](http://www.zotero.org/) is a free research tool that helps scholars collect, organize, cite, and share their research sources. Zotero has been around for a while as a Firefox plug-in, but the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University recently released an alpha version of Zotero Everywhere—a stand-alone application for Windows, Mac, and Linux. With Zotero, students can organize their sources, store Web archives or PDF's of the articles they've saved, and easily export their citations into their papers. Zotero also allows groups of users to create shared folders; citations added to shared folders will appear in the libraries of all group members. You could use Zotero groups to compile a list of references for a class, for instance, or ask students to collect their sources when working on collaborative projects.

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You might also point your students toward a cloud-based application for making and organizing notes. [Evernote](http://www.evernote.com/) allows users to capture just about anything, from plain text notes to Web pages to photos. Users can gain access to their libraries through Evernote's Web interface, or through applications for Windows, OS X, and mobile platforms such as IS and Android. Items added to Evernote from any devices are synched to Evernote's servers and then pushed to any other devices on which a user accesses Evernote. Students could use Evernote, then, to take notes in class from their laptops. Those notes would then be available on their phones, their desktops, or any other computers connected to the Internet. Since students can share notebooks in Evernote, a group of students could easily share their notes, ideas, or other class-related items they've captured around the Web.

**I want my students to practice real scholarship.** When students work for a broader audience than just their teacher, they often work with more care. To encourage your students to think about their work as public, you could require them to submit their work through a class blog. If your class blog runs on WordPress, you could install a plug-in like [Commentpress,](http://www.futureofthebook.org/commentpress/) which allows visitors to leave fine-grained comments. Instead of commenting through one box at the bottom of each post, visitors to a site running Commentpress can remark on individual paragraphs. Scholars are starting to embrace public writing technologies like Commentpress. While writing her book [*Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*](http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence) (to be published by New York University Press later this year, and currently free online), Kathleen Fitzpatrick, a media-studies professor at Pomona College (see her article on Page B26), solicited feedback on chapters in progress at MediaCommons, a site that runs on Commentpress. By encouraging students to publish their work in similar ways, you could help them think about their writing not as a private performance for their teacher, but as real scholarship.

If you really want students to get their (intellectual) hands dirty, you could ask them to build archives using Omeka, a free, open-source Web-publishing platform. Omeka allows you to store digital documents, images, and videos, and to share your collections by building exhibits. Once upon a time you needed real tech chops to use Omeka, but last year the Center for History and New Media launched Omeka.net, a fully hosted version of the software that eliminates earlier technical hurdles. Professors have started using Omeka in their classes to give students experience compiling and interpreting archives. Jeffrey McClurken, a historian at the University of Mary Washington, notes on *The Chronicle*'s ProfHacker blog that "students can create some impressive projects using [Omeka] and learn a wide variety of skills (digitization, organization, presentation, exhibition, metadata creation) along the way." At the University of Nebraska, Andrew Jewell, a librarian, and Douglas Seefeldt, a historian, helped students create classroom Omeka projects. Mr. Jewell says Omeka "provides students with a chance to build an argument that both utilizes the digital environment and survives beyond the boundaries of one semester (and one professorial reader)."

**I want my students to work collaboratively.** In my courses, my students write, workshop, revise, workshop, and revise again. I collect and comment on papers electronically—if for no other reason than because my handwriting is terrible. Managing student papers through revision cycles is a chore for me and them, however, as files are e-mailed, saved, modified, and e-mailed again. This complicated procedure can interfere with productive collaboration rather than fostering it.

So instead, I've started asking students to draft their papers in [Google Docs,](http://docs.google.com) an online office suite through which users can create spreadsheets, presentations, and forms. Users can gain access to their documents from whatever computer they happen to be using, and with whomever they wish: a single person or the entire Internet. More germane to the classroom, however, Google Docs simplifies the process of collaborative writing. During peer workshops, each group's members share their documents. They can work simultaneously on one author's document at a time; any comments or edits made by one group member are immediately seen by the entire group. There's a chat system built in, so collaborators can discuss the changes they're making. When a paper is ready for me to review, the author simply shares the document with me. My comments are immediately available to the student—an invaluable feature in a class founded on frequent revision.

When used in support of sound pedagogical goals, technology can enhance the classroom experience for students and their teachers. When thinking about technology in the classroom, always think about your own goals for your students. If a tool looks as if it may help you meet those goals, don't be afraid to give it a try.

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