

USING GOOGLE TOOLS TO OPEN YOUR CLASSROOM TO THE WORLD

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I love gadgets. Always have - Kitchen gadgets, car gadgets, classroom gadgets, computer gadgets. You name them, I'm a sucker for trying them out. I love the ingenuity that goes into them. I admire (and envy) the people that are behind all these whizzy things that are invented to make our lives easier (or- just cooler? ;-). I guess that is why I like computers so much, in general. I enjoy the challenge of seeking out ways to incorporate them into my life and daily practices (including in the classroom).

I have been in the classroom for over 30 years. I never would have thought that after all that time, I would manage to find new challenges to excite and inspire me. But, I have. With the introduction of the interactive white board (IWB) onto the scene, wifi and constant connectivity of my school and my students, I keep finding new ideas and adventures to throw me out of my daily equilibrium and challenge me to conquer them and make them mine (actually – they keep finding me).

Aside from the fact that I love these challenges, I am well aware that my students are very different from students of the past, in as much as they are growing up in the digital age. Whatever they do when they leave school, they will be citizens of a much more digital society than we were when we stepped out of our cocoons and into the world of grown-ups. Regardless of where they go - be it the army, or work, or study, they will need to be digitally fluent; they will need to know how to deal with the psychedelic rate at which digitalization is causing users to learn and relearn and relearn again, what they previously knew how to do, (even knew how to do WELL)

And so, as a teacher, I feel that my job is not only to teach them English, but also to try to prepare them to face this new world order which awaits them. As they say, we must train our students to deal with a future that we cannot, ourselves, imagine.

In light of this awareness, when I was accepted to participate in the first ever Google Teachers' Academy (GTA) in Israel, I was thrilled. Fifty lucky souls (classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, technology specialists, librarians, administrators, professional trainers, and other education professionals among them) were hosted for an intensive two days at the Tel Aviv Google offices. We were exposed to (no - literally bombarded with) innovative products, technologies and instructional strategies for education.

In my talk at the summer 2012 ETAI , I attempted to give participants a taste of what we experienced in those two days. As I learned in the Academy, I told participants that the best way to get anything out of such an experience, is to make note of the names of the tools I was about to present, in the very limited time I had at my disposal. I especially encouraged them to make note of those tools that set off a spark in their minds for something they could envision doing with that tool, in their class, or even for administrative purposes. That was what worked for me, anyway. You need to start out small. Choose a class with which you feel comfortable experimenting. Proficiency comes through doing - through the trial and error of playing around with different tools. Don't get me wrong. Not all of my students loved it. In fact, I had (and still have) the impression that some of them were taking up a collection to encourage my early retirement (or take out a contract on my life). But I think they are getting used to it. And the possibilities are so promising, that I really believe it is worth the effort (and the risk).

Among the tools I presented at the conference were:

- Googledocs and Forms (can be used for online quizzes, collaboration on documents, working on groups for projects, gathering data, etc.)
- Google Sites (make a site for your class, have your students make their own sites for project work, etc.)
- Google Earth and Google Maps (have your students make a virtual tour, or map out the lifetime travels of a famous person they are researching)
- YouTube (Make clips of different activities in English, prepare online mini-lectures for your students to watch and learn from for homework)
- Google Calendar (Use it for yourself – can be synched on smartphones- share due dates with your classes, set meetings with colleagues and parents)
- Google Plus (for Hangouts) (Have virtual lessons or one-on-one tutoring sessions)
- Search Stories (students tell a “story” using key words – they add music and come up with a short clip that uses the Google search engine, which they can then be asked to talk about)

We also looked at other non-Google, Web 2 tools:

- Voki – Students record themselves, pick an appropriate avatar and background – one of my tasks this year was to recite a poem using this tool.

- Prezi It's the next generation replacing PowerPoint – it zooms!
- QR Barcode Reader - If you have students with smartphones, make a barcode out of pictures, words – make a scavenger hunt! They do not ALL have to have a smartphone – enough to have a few in the class- and they are becoming more and more common.
- Screenr - Record yourself and/or anything on the computer screen – make short webcasts and assign as homework. Or – let the students use it to make presentations using powerpoint or whatever they want to show on the screen.
- Flipsnack - takes any PDF file and makes it into a book that flips the pages. Have your students write a book, including graphics, just show them the tool – they'll find what to do with it!

As I told my participants – this is only the tip of the iceberg. Every day new innovations are coming out. Once you start, you see that there is no end to the tools that are exponentially filling our realm of education, and can be used to teach, to inspire, to enable and to excite our students in their learning processes. The possibilities for all students are astounding.

Even more exciting, is the fact that we gain useful tools for differentiating our teaching so we can reach more students. The tools that are out there, now allow us to address different learning styles as well as learning challenges – to reach our students who have serious learning disabilities in ways we could only have dreamt of a few years ago.

Now, I am very lucky, and have lots of technological options in my school and teacher-training environments. But even those of you who do NOT work at venues that are technologically equipped, can start to learn about and take advantage of these tools. Not having an IWB (Interactive White Board) in your classroom, or even a computer and projector, is no reason to sit back and let the parade pass you by. Most students have access to computers and internet these days, and before we know it, there will ONLY be Smartphones. Instead of fighting with our students to turn them off, we will need to learn how to have them turned ON, for learning.

The best thing about all this is that it is FREE! ALL of the tools I introduced are free to download and use. With the wonders of YouTube, you can find recorded tutorials explaining how to use most of these tools. Technical explanations as well as methodological ideas can be found by searching the Internet. All you need is the name of the tool. The ideas will flow! In one of Kevin Costner's movies, they said, "Build it and they will come." Well, it's being built all the time. All a teacher needs to do now, is to venture out there and play.

Biodata:

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