

# Learning to Select **enter:** The Necessary Shifts from

When we say “book,” we mean “reading.” This alone distinguishes the book from many technologies, not so much because of the simplicity of its implementation – in my language, left to right, top to bottom, front to back – but, perhaps in a more useful way, because of how we appear to have absorbed an understanding of its purpose – reading – *above* the technology that sustains it.

This is a pretty convincing thought to me. In the years I have spent in English classrooms, my own and others’, not once have I heard anyone – teaching colleague, learning colleague, visitor... anyone – consider my work, or theirs, and feel compelled to say “well, the book is just a tool, you know.”

Not once.

I’ll admit I’m glad about that. I don’t know too many other technologies that can make such a powerful claim (though, if you’re like me, the refrigerator makes a compelling case; I confess that “fridge” probably means “dinner” more than it does, say, an instrument requiring skills in the laws of physics as they may be applied to the extraction of heat through compression, evaporation... well, you get the idea.) To me, the refrigerator also provides a powerful, if secondary, example of what I mean by “absorbed” here, namely, how technologies may be understood more by the uses we put them to than by the instruments that sustain those uses, or the skill sets we deem necessary for educational purposes in schools.

In a sense, instruments of technology, like the book and the refrigerator, become what they mean to us through our uses of them, and less the technologies they may also be. The things we

might learn – about the instruments, sure, but also – primarily, really – about how the uses we put them to partly change us, is really the subject of this article. How do we understand, or learn, differently as a consequence of our work with these “tools?” What would we do differently if this understanding were actually at the centre of our “technology” initiatives in school?

I have come to see most of my own work in this area as learning *with* more than *about*, or even *because* of technology. Central to this thinking is the significance of one’s entry into the conversation about technology and its educational use. I am less concerned, for instance, with the idea that we need to create the

“knowledge workers of the new millennium” in our schools than I am with developing areas of shared interest among those who have something real to say to one another, and particularly among those who may discover that they do. Christine Uy’s contribution to this article illustrates these links between technology and the development of communities of shared interest.

## The Writers In Electronic Residence (WIER) Program

The *Writers In Electronic Residence* (WIER) program forms the basis for much of my understanding of online learning and teaching practices, particularly insofar as its impact on face-to-face learning communities is concerned. The technology WIER harnesses to accomplish its work is Internet- and web-based computer conferencing, or, asynchronous group communication. However, as I think you will see in the vignettes that follow, WIER really has very little to do with the technology that sustains it, and much more to do with the relationships that develop among people who become colleagues in areas of shared learning

*The local community cable channel covered these events.*

Nova Scotia born poet George Elliott Clarke is also an English professor at the University of Toronto.



# High Tech to High Teach

and activity. Although this article is not about WIER *per se*, I draw on my experience with the program in order to advance the ideas I offer here. Neither is it about Canadian authors or their literature, although our experiences with them illustrate the impact of the “electronic residency” on local, face-to-face communities.

It is fair to say WIER has helped me understand that some of the ways in which technology is understood and addressed in schools and school systems has less to do with learning itself than it does with learning technology. If this is because we have simply accepted the “tool” metaphor, we may well be overplaying the corresponding emphasis on skill acquisition; I have noted elsewhere my view that the computer is no more a “tool” than Shakespeare is a book (and, of course, that it is no less one either) and that maxims – like the tool metaphor – are perhaps more unhelpful than they are untrue.<sup>1</sup> This is because of the ways they shape our understanding and define our entry into conversations and policies about them. In my example, I think it can be safely argued that, for most people, it is the *experience* of Shakespeare that matters most, whatever the enabling technology – the lovely book or the dramatic theatre.

Clearly, technologies like computers *are* tools. But I am concerned by the prevalence of this metaphor in our schools, and particularly by how it shapes and guides our contexts for thinking about technology, its broader implications, and its consequent impact on the ways we think about learning and teaching practices.

Understood this way, these “tools” operate in the service of *production* and *efficiency*; we can (or are supposed to be able to) do more, faster. But what if our



*The local community cable channel covered these events.*

Christine Uy  
with writers  
Dave Margoshes  
from Regina,  
and Linda Rogers  
from Victoria.

purposes lie elsewhere? For its part, WIER is more concerned with experience, reflection, and considered response to future meaningful activity. Key, then, to understanding the “electronic residency” is to see that it *includes the local setting*, that the electronic presence of the “other” – writers in WIER’s case – begins to change the learning relationships among all constituencies represented, change that extends beyond participation in the program. It underscores the need to distinguish between experiences that may be sustained by technology and the technology itself. And it summons us to make a necessary shift from emphasizing *skills* that are tools-based and technology-driven, to *experiences* that are task-based, and project-driven.

The *vignettes* that follow illustrate this thinking. The first is drawn from

WIER’s earliest experiences, while the second considers its integration into other facets of school life, and is drawn from a recent experience.

## Diffusion of *Which Innovations, Exactly?*

Everett Rogers’ work in the diffusion of innovations helped me to understand that the “early adopters” of technological change within schools engaged in WIER were not a group that many (really, any) of my colleagues had expected to find.<sup>2</sup> WIER’s first “early adopters” were teachers who happened to share three characteristics:

- **They were female.** At the time this meant that the teachers themselves believed they were in the minority when it came to technology use in their schools;

For its part, WIER is more concerned with experience, reflection, and considered response to future meaningful activity.

## EN BREF

Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER) est un programme en ligne qui met en rapport des élèves et des écrivains. Son succès est davantage dû au partage d'activités et de connaissances qu'il suscite qu'à la technologie qui sous-tend les échanges. Dans une école, ces liens ont donné naissance à la Série des auteurs canadiens, grâce à laquelle 16 auteurs ont partagé leurs idées et leurs expériences avec les élèves d'un cours de langue anglaise.

### ■ They were nearing retirement.

For some, “innovation” was not an attribute they would readily have claimed, and certainly not where technology was concerned; and, perhaps most compelling,

### ■ They were teachers who had not previously used technology in their teaching.

This last point was particularly revealing because, taken together, these teachers represented a constituency that had not seen their work reflected in the use of technology, and, perhaps not surprisingly, did not see value in the tools-based, technology-driven instruction of professional development programs in their school districts.

However, when it came to the idea of WIER, they were quick to see their own notions of learning and teaching reflected in it. When they did, they were just as quick to incorporate the experience sustained by technology into their writing and reading programs.

“I’ve been doing this for 30 years,” noted Fran, a now retired early adopter from Owen Sound, Ontario. “Where have *you* been?”

The teachers had come to see their students as legitimate informants on their own learning, and they had understood the need to reflect this in the curriculum developed with them. They had built, with their students – now their learning colleagues – classrooms of

shared interest and activity. For the teachers, who also saw their professional aspirations reflected in the work of their students, involvement in WIER – online and in the classroom – began to inform and extend their understandings of this legitimacy.

I returned to classroom teaching in September, 1999, following a series of secondments to universities in B.C. and Ontario. I was excited by the prospect of implementing WIER, and initiatives based on WIER, in a school setting. The school was receptive; we purchased a substantial collection of contemporary Canadian literature comprising the complete works in print by WIER authors, for use in the school’s senior English courses. We also mounted the Contemporary Canadian Authors Series, visits by 16 of the authors who had worked in WIER.

Christine Uy, a senior student in classes that developed and used these resources, worked with me to research and operate this series until her graduation in June, 2001. In the following piece, she documents the promise of integrated technology-enabled experiences in the building of face-to-face communities and the link between technology, learning, and content.

poet was an honour in itself, let alone introducing one!

The day of the reading came, and I found myself completely immersed in Musgrave’s vibrant poetry and her humorous anecdotes about life as a Canadian writer. I thought, “Wow . . . *I’d love to have more of these sessions.*” A simple, unspoken idea came to life in the most remarkable way, as each month thereafter I met a new Canadian writer who drew me into his or her intricate world through the immense power of words. The *Contemporary Canadian Authors Series*, in conjunction with *Writers in Electronic Residence*, were the stepping stones for my awareness of Canadian literature and authors. The series transformed my final two years of high school.

The *Authors Series* took me on an adventurous ride through Canadian literature, from Robert J. Sawyer’s radical novels, to Susan Glickman’s witty poetry, to Guillermo Verdecchia’s captivating plays. To open their books and let the words leap out of the pages and into the imagination is one thing, but to sit in a room and listen to their own voices capture the emotion within their stories is quite another.

These extraordinary learning experiences began as electronic correspondence and ended up as personal, poignant and intimate.

## From the Internet to the Classroom: The Contemporary Canadian Authors Series

I was merely in the right place, at the right time: Mr. Owen’s English class, November 1999. I remember the excitement in his voice as he spoke of a Canadian poet’s visit to our high school, Lester B. Pearson Collegiate Institute in Toronto. He asked me if I would be willing to prepare a brief biography of Susan Musgrave for the audience of students and staff. I readily accepted; after all, being in the presence of a *bona fide*

The *Authors Series* offered many opportunities for discussion between the writers and the students – opportunities that began on the Internet and came to life in the classroom and the school. In one of our sessions, we concluded that a poet’s job is to tackle an issue to the point where, if it does not offend *someone*, the poet has ultimately failed to accomplish his or her job. Lorna Crozier, Susan Musgrave and Carolyn Smart provided prime examples of poetry that “offends”. They unabashedly – but not recklessly – reveal controversial truths so explicitly that, more often than

not, readers are taken aback. At Pearson, many were. But these poets mean no harm and do no wrong – they are simply provoking thought in the minds of their readers. Certainly, at Pearson, many thought.

Young people are constantly confronted with issues involving ethnicity, race and culture. It was especially enlightening to hear from authors such as Cecil Foster, Lawrence Hill and Nalo Hopkinson, who delve into scenarios filled with passion and sorrow, yet also celebrate the diversity that establishes who we are in the world.

WIER gave us a rare chance to see beyond the literature, while the Authors Series allowed us to interact personally with 16 authors who took the time to correlate their personal experiences with their writing. Although these experiences are distinctly theirs, they are instinctively familiar to the rest of us. They freely engaged in conversations with us, imparting advice on how to commence a career in writing and discussing their personal inspirations. I

recall how Robert Priest's eyes shone as we talked about his unique ability to write both charming children's stories and some of the most outrageous poetry I have ever read. And the thoughtfulness of Dave Margoshes as he encouraged me to follow my heart in my aspirations to become a journalist or teacher. These were extraordinary learning experiences that began as electronic correspondence and ended up as personal, poignant and intimate.

I consider myself one of the most fortunate people to be entering university this fall; my solid foundation in Canadian literature will carry me through the English courses in my schedule. One day, I will find myself in a quaint coffee shop, in the heat of a discussion about George Elliott Clarke's "Execution Poems" or Crozier's "The Sex Lives of Vegetables". And I will not be lost, nor left trailing behind, because I will remember the days when I actually shook the hands of these writers and listened to their stories.

I may even quote a poet. Or two. ☺

**For more information on WIER, see advertisement on page 39.**

- 1 T. Owen, "Poems That Change the World: Canada's Wired Writers," *English Journal* 84(4), (October 1995).
- 2 E.M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

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**Christine Uy** begins post-secondary studies this fall at York University, where she plans to pursue degrees in English and Education. She was the Valedictorian of her graduation class and is the recipient of an Entrance Scholarship and a Bell Canada Scholarship. Cuy@wier.ca

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