



Rosemary Henzell helps teachers imagine new possibilities for their English classroom...

But first, the fear...

When the new NESA English Standard Stage 6 Syllabus was released, I imagine many teachers were surprised, and more than a little confused, by the new *Module A: Contemporary Possibilities*. Even for someone like myself, who has been experimenting and working with digital texts in the classroom for several years now, it seems daunting. Most English teachers were drawn to our subject area because we love literature - books, poetry, plays...the REAL stuff. How can digital texts compete with the richness and depth of the texts we love...and are they even literature?

A second area of concern, and an extremely valid one, is technical expertise: many teachers have little to no experience in building websites or creating digital multimodal texts and, with limited time and resources, how are they supposed to a) learn and b) teach others? I have led several digital units within my faculty, and witnessed firsthand (and felt!) the fear and uncertainty many teachers feel when they are asked to step into this brave new world.

So should we all just choose a film and forget about the notion of digital texts, consigning them to the perennially "too hard" basket? Or could we perhaps take this as an opportunity to engage students in the creation of something wonderful and deeply relevant to their lives?

Imagine if students could...

- Compose a digital essay incorporating links, images, videos and a link to a survey to gather reader responses?
- Build a website that explores a local issue or event, with groups of students responsible for 1-2 pages each that included elements such as videos they have made, creative responses, and a quiz?
- Create a Choose Your Own Adventure experience that offers different reading paths through the story, with added videos, narratives and external links?

A basic unit overview

Module A offers us a chance to help students explore and interpret the digital world they inhabit, and support them to become creators of meaningful online experiences, making them agents in their learning and the world beyond the classroom. Below is a brief outline of how you might approach this kind of unit:



1. 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly': How have digital technologies affected the way we communicate for better and for worse? Begin with a discussion about the very real issues of online and digital communication. The Guardian Interactive Site [The Seven Deadly Digital Sins](#) has some great conversation starters.
2. Close study of an interactive site or digital narrative focused on a key event or issue. [SBS Interactive](#) has an incredible collection of texts on a wide range of issues. They cover a range of text types and offer different reader experiences, for example:
 - [The Boat](#) (digital narrative about Vietnamese refugees) with [resources available](#);
 - [Cronulla Riots: The Day That Shocked The Nation](#) (documentary and interactive site);
 - [Exit Australia](#) (Choose Your Own Adventure simulation presenting Australia as a conflict zone);
 - [My Grandmother's Lingo](#) (short text highlighting endangered languages by teaching you several words of Marra, an endangered Indigenous language).
3. Creating social change: How global movements are harnessing the power of social media and digital technologies. Examine movements or groups that are relevant or inspiring to students in order to guide their project design. [World Pulse](#) is one example, using social networks to change women's lives around the world.

Possible relevant syllabus outcomes for the unit:

- EN11-2: A student uses and evaluates processes, skills and knowledge required to effectively respond to and compose texts in different modes, media and technologies
- EN11-7: A student understands and explains the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds
- EN11-9: A student reflects on, assesses and monitors own learning and develops individual and collaborative processes to become an independent learner

Creation: the basic project

Students design and build a website or interactive online experience that explores, for example, a local event, place, person or history, or a social issue of importance to them. Their aim is to utilise the forms and features of digital texts to enhance the audience's experience and promote active participation. The most important points are that the project should be centred around something that matters to students, and that it be shared beyond the classroom. Everything else is up for negotiation. To help you plan an approach to this process, here are some details about how to manage successful Project Based Learning.



The magic of project based learning

Project Based Learning (PBL) has been around for a long time. Its synchronicity with 21st Century Learning ideals and the possibilities it offers for engagement with the Cross-Curricular Priorities mean that more and more schools and teachers are embracing it as an authentic education model. The key to successful PBL lies in the following eight Essential Elements of Gold Standard project design:

- **Key Knowledge, Understanding, and Success Skills** - The project is focused on student learning goals, including standards-based content and skills such as critical thinking/problem solving, communication, collaboration, and self-management.
- **Challenging Problem or Question** - The project is framed by a meaningful problem to solve or a question to answer, at the appropriate level of challenge.
- **Sustained Inquiry** - Students engage in a rigorous, extended process of asking questions, finding resources, and applying information.
- **Authenticity** - The project features real-world context, tasks and tools, quality standards, or impact, or, speaks to students' personal concerns, interests, and issues in their lives.
- **Student Voice and Choice** - Students make some decisions about the project, including how they work and what they create.
- **Reflection** - Students and teachers reflect on learning, the effectiveness of their inquiry and project activities, the quality of student work, and obstacles and how to overcome them.
- **Critique and Revision** - Students give, receive, and use feedback to improve their process and products.
- **Public Product** - Students make their project work public by explaining, displaying and/or presenting it to people beyond the classroom.

Source: http://www.bie.org/about/what_pbl

In terms of engaging students in their learning, the concepts of Authenticity, Student Voice and Choice, and a Public Product are crucial. When young people know that they are making something for the 'real world' beyond the classroom, it suddenly matters so much more.

For more information and resources, the Department's Futures Learning site has great material, including a PBL [toolkit](#).

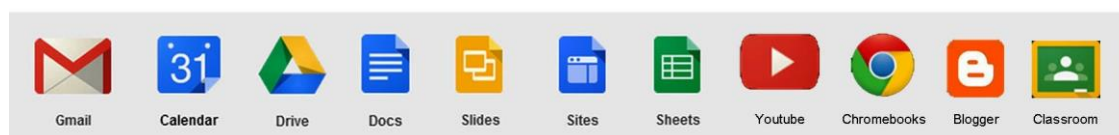


Digital texts made manageable: getting started with Google apps

All Department teachers and students have access to Google's G Suite through the portal. There are a few reasons I find Google apps such a great tool to work with:

1. Students need to sign in using their school email, allowing you to track their participation and giving you more control. I found with sites like Edmodo, students tend to forget their password or email account and need to rejoin groups multiple times. Before I used Classroom, I would share Google Docs with students, but they would appear as Anonymous Animals, so I never knew who was writing what.
2. Everything is integrated, so it is straightforward to move things between Classroom, Sites, etc. It is also far more streamlined and intuitive than Office (in my opinion) which means that people adapt to it and master the basics quickly.
3. Simple sharing options with various levels of control and privacy. Once you master the Share menu, you can give others access to things in seconds. No more USBs, downloading or emailing things.
4. Work saves automatically. Since you never have to save your work, you can never forget to save your work. No more lost documents! Also, the History function allows you to revert to previous versions quickly, so even if someone accidentally deletes everything, you can recover it easily.

The apps you're most likely to use



Sites

An incredibly simple and intuitive site builder. You can choose a pre-made template, or start from a basic site and customise it. Sites integrates with all other Google Apps, so you can upload and insert content in seconds once it is in your Drive. The teacher creates the site then invites students to be editors. Here is [a StoryWeb site](#) my Year 9 class made about *The Taming of the Shrew* in 2016. And here is a [tutorial](#) from YouTube about how to use Sites.

Drive

The hub of all your Google apps content. Everything you create will be available in your Drive, and it is available from any computer, anywhere, any time. If you use Classroom, students' assignment work will appear in your Classroom folder. You can share folders or your whole Drive with others, and the Team Drive function now lets you create collaborative Drives. Here is a [tutorial](#) on some basics of Drive by the same person as the one above.



Google Docs, Slides and Sheets

These are Google versions of Word, PowerPoint and Excel. They don't have all the same advanced functions, but you cannot beat the benefit of students creating a shared document and NEVER having to hear the excuse "Jane's got our work and she's away" ever again. Click [here](#) for a helpful tutorial.

Forms

At its most basic level, Forms makes quizzes and questionnaires. The responses get collated to a Sheet. However, you can also use it to build in interactivity. Depending on the response chosen, the reader is directed to a certain page, or required to complete an activity before continuing. Well worth investigating possible applications and exploring this [tutorial](#).

Classroom

Having used Edmodo for several years, I switched over to Classroom two years ago. At first it was a bit limited in comparison, but Google continue to build more Classroom features, and it is an increasingly powerful online environment. Since everything integrates so smoothly, it makes sharing work and resources simple.

Final thoughts

Given how much change we are all going to be managing next year, it may not be feasible to leap into digital PBL straight away. However, if you dip your metaphorical toe in the water with a Google Doc here and a Classroom there, you will be amazed at how quickly it integrates into your practice. Slowly build up your own knowledge and confidence, and train students in the apps, through small tasks.

At the end of the day, the goal is engagement and authentic audience. Use the technology to help students reach beyond the classroom and become active voices in the wider world. In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world", and really, that is the contemporary possibility that matters most.

Rosemary currently teaches English at Willoughby Girls High School. She completed her Master of Teaching in 2013, having spent seven years as an adult ESL teacher and TESOL trainer in Australia and Japan. Her MTeach Action Research Project investigated how to raise student confidence and agency in essay writing. Rosemary is part of her school's Professional Learning Team, and is currently investigating how Project Based Learning and Teaching For Understanding frameworks can be utilised in the English classroom.