

Technology and Education at the Bread Loaf School of English

Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English, in existence since 1920, is a summer graduate school, mainly for secondary-school teachers of English. The school makes use of four campuses each summer: the home campus at the foot of Bread Loaf Mountain, near Middlebury, Vermont; Lincoln College, University of Oxford; the Native American Preparatory School, outside Santa Fe, New Mexico; and the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau. Altogether, some 500 students, most of them seeking the M.A., attend each summer. But, although our school is in formal session for only six weeks in the summer, it exists in virtual form for 52 weeks a year. The ways in which we exist year-round are probably not those that you suspect; we do not, for example, offer distance learning courses. Instead, we have an ongoing existence, during those 46 weeks a year when we are not convened face-to-face, as a community of teachers and learners, through our telecommunications network, BreadNet.



We inaugurated BreadNet in 1984—all but primeval times for electronic teacher networks. Our reasons for doing so were simple. Bread Loaf offers an unusually intense and intensive educational experience in the summers, but summer always eventually yields to autumn, and the teachers attending Bread Loaf must always go back to their jobs and their academic-year worlds. Before 1984, the experience of going home was very often one of severe letdown, as teachers returned from high-energy summers to workplaces where their reports of the summer's excitement were often met with feeble interest at best, a cynical shrug of their colleagues' shoulders at worst. BreadNet was established first of all, then, to keep our community alive, to sustain some of the summer's intensity and all of the summer's friendships, and to offer teachers a forum for advice as they recommenced their professional lives each fall.

But teachers are teachers, and it wasn't long at all before BreadNet made its triumphant entry into classrooms. Very early on, we began text-based exchanges between the classrooms of Bread Loaf teachers, often under the most primitive of conditions. Many schools didn't yet have phone lines in their classrooms, and so teachers would have their students write essays in class and download them onto a floppy disk, which the teacher would then take to her home computer that evening, for transmission to a partner classroom in another part of the country.

Since the early days of BreadNet, there has been a boom in the availability of technology in the schools and an equivalent boom in the number of Bread Loaf teachers whose classes are carrying out these exchanges. The greatest boost in our numbers was brought about by two successive grants to Bread Loaf from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, totaling more than \$5 million, over the period 1993-2001. Under these grants, Bread Loaf has recruited over 200 teachers from low-income rural communities in 8 states: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Vermont; the rural teachers recruited from these eight states constitute the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network. Whereas the classroom use of BreadNet had previously been **offered** to all Bread Loaf students, its use was now **required** of these rural teachers.

The combination of the Bread Loaf summer experience and the academic-year use of an electronic network for teachers and students has revolutionized so many classrooms that Bread Loaf has included a technological component in every subsequent proposal that we have made to funders. Among others, the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the state departments of education in Alaska, Kentucky, Ohio, and South Carolina have funded teachers to attend Bread Loaf, to take our courses, and to take part in BreadNet exchanges.

So what's the big deal? What are the exchanges all about, and what makes them work? Teachers at Bread Loaf each summer pair up and choose the subject matter that will be central to their classroom exchanges in the subsequent academic year. Most frequently, the subject of a student exchange is a text: books such as **The Diary of a Young Girl**, **Romeo and Juliet**, and **To Kill a Mockingbird** are frequent choices. But some classrooms choose non-text-based projects as well. Many classrooms, for example, choose to study and write about their own environments. One of the most fascinating exchanges ever carried out on BreadNet was one between the classroom of Phil Sittnick at Laguna Middle School, Laguna NM, and the classroom of Janet Atkins, who at the time taught at Wade Hampton High School in Hampton SC. During much of the Cold War period, Laguna was the site of the Laguna-Paguete Mine, at the time the largest open-pit uranium mine in the world; Hampton is near the Savannah River Site, where nuclear waste is treated for storage. The two teachers' classrooms, that is, were located at locales near the two ends of the processing of uranium, from mining to waste-storage. Their classes researched the history of the nuclear sites near their schools and explored the long-term effects of the sites upon the lives and the health of the people in their communities. This is "place-based" learning at its very best, affording students the opportunity to learn by observing and researching the familiar world that lies right before their eyes.

All of these topics are inherently interesting, but I am not the first to observe that secondary-school students are not always eager to write about what adults think of as "inherently interesting" subjects. The magic ingredient in these exchanges is the idea of an "authentic audience" out there to whom the students are writing, not just the teacher at the head of the classroom. During these exchanges, many students realize, for the first time in their lives, that there are situations in which one is represented to the world only through the words that one writes. Suddenly, articulate and well-crafted language seems not just a school chore, but, intensely, a matter of self-representation. Many teachers have anecdotes of students who had always shown the utmost indifference to language suddenly, and with great interest, asking their peers for editing advice.

All the writing in these BreadNet exchanges, however, is not formal writing. I myself have been involved with teachers in a number of these exchanges, and the writing varies from getting-acquainted language to formal analysis of works such as **Heart of Darkness** and **Dubliners**. The “getting-acquainted” writing isn’t simply warm-up stuff. These students write in a wide variety of genres, a wide variety of tones, and, since they have the transcripts of their own writing to examine, they sometimes become very intelligently conscious of the overall importance of voice in their writing. Bread Loaf graduate Scott Christian has written a groundbreaking book, **Exchanging Lives**, on the issues of secondary-school students experimenting and creating their own voices in their electronic writing. They learn other things from their writing too. Dean Blase, a Cincinnati teacher, had a disruptive moment in one of her exchanges when two boys in a classroom at the opposite end of an exchange began coming on strong to two girls in her classroom. Dean is an excellent teacher, and she and her students turned the tables and transformed the incident—right there on the transcript—into a linguistic event, a teachable moment. Perhaps never before has the act of hitting on a girl so quickly become the focus of rhetorical analysis.

If exchanges take place across gender boundaries, they also take place across cultural boundaries. Bread Loaf teachers and their students come from an extraordinary array of cultural backgrounds, and they often write to one another across the boundaries usually separating those backgrounds. Such exchanges are not always easy for the students or the teachers, as they enter new cultural contexts and cannot be certain of when they’re being unconsciously offensive. One solution is to put the matter right out on the table, as the central subject of discussion. This past year, an exciting exchange took place among three classrooms: Barbara Pearlman’s predominantly Anglo high school classroom in Truth or Consequences NM, Joy Rutter’s Navajo Window Rock High School classroom in Ft. Defiance AZ, and Mariah Offer’s Yup’ik classroom in the preK-12 Tukurngailnguq School in Stebbins AK. Instead of pretending to ignore their different backgrounds, the students made conscious and unconscious stereotyping the central subject of their exchange. The Navajo students wrote eloquently of what it means to be called “Indian,” as that term, itself originally a howling European mistake, has been overlaid and encrusted over the centuries from the first European settlers to the heyday of the Hollywood Western. But both the Ft. Defiance students and the Truth or Consequences students were then taken aback to discover that the term “Eskimo,” with which they were entirely comfortable, is itself offensive to many of the Yup’ik students with whom they were corresponding.

Insensibly, as I have been writing, supposedly about technology in Bread Loaf classrooms, I have wandered away from the subject of technology itself, to talk about the students and their writing—and that is an accurate reflection of how technology ends up disappearing beneath the writing in Bread Loaf teachers’ classrooms. When we first began BreadNet, we were awfully concerned about the technology itself; but the technology very soon came to be what it in fact must be: the servant of the content-rich curricula of the classrooms in which it is used.

We have gone some distance beyond electronic exchanges at Bread Loaf. With a generous grant from Chapbooks.com, dozens of Bread Loaf classrooms have posted their work on a web site and had their writing (poetry, fiction, memoirs) published in handsomely bound books. (To choose one from among the many Bread Loaf chapbooks I have read: I was immensely moved to read **Still in Clayton**, written by the students of Dan Furlow in Clayton

NM. The students' memoir writing, mostly about growing up in ranch country in northeast New Mexico, seemed to me already elegiac, perhaps beyond the students' intentions, as they recorded a way of life that, even since their childhoods, has begun to become a part of the past. It is a book that will be invaluable to some future historian.) Some Bread Loaf classrooms have of course created their own Web pages, and some Bread Loaf teachers have received training in multi-media authoring. We at Bread Loaf are convinced that most—not all—of the forms of technology that are invading contemporary life can in fact be put to innovative use, actually to increase, rather than to destroy, literacy and students' interest in reading and writing.

If you have read this far and would like to know more about our teachers' accounts of using technology in their classrooms, e-mail to us at BLSE@breadnet.middlebury.edu, or write to:

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We will be happy to send you a recent issue of our **Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network Magazine**, in which many of these teachers and their students tell their own stories.

Jim Maddox
Director, Bread Loaf School of English

