The Empire Skypes Back:
How Our Students Interviewed Ian Doescher and
7 Tips on Successfully Skyping in Your Classroom
by Adam Watson (NBCT)
May 18, 2014
Skype: **mrwatsonteacher**

Back in the fall of 2013, when I began writing the grant that would ultimately lead to my purchase of a class set of Ian Doescher's *William Shakespeare's Star Wars: Verily, A New Hope*, I thought it wouldn't hurt to reach out to Mr. Doescher via his website and ask him if he'd like to Skype with our freshmen English students. The Skype session would make a wonderful finale to our *Star Wars* and Shakespeare Unit. The worst he could do was say no, right? To my delight, he agreed. We decided on a format of about 25 minutes of Ian doing some readings and sharing insights from his book, and 20 minutes of Q & A with my students. After several logistical emails to determine a date and time, as well as befriending each other on Skype, the countdown began.

A few weeks before our May 2, 2014 Skype session (just as the class finished Doescher's book), I put the students in pairs to generate open-ended questions for Ian. Open-ended questions tend to be "how" or "why" oriented, and cannot be answered with a "yes/no," a number, or a short phrase. Questions like "Do you like *Star Wars*?" "What year did you write your book?" and "What genre is the text?" would all be examples of questions that are NOT open-ended. (Students had experience in this from an activity earlier in the school year. I did a game where "I spied with my little eye" an object in the classroom. Students could then only ask yes or no questions to determine what it was. This took a long time. I then picked another object and had them ask open-ended questions to find it; students discovered the object much more quickly. Lesson learned? While yes/no questions have their place, open-ended questions are more powerful!) I asked each pair to write up five questions, and decide which of the two students would be the "spokesperson" to ask a question.   This took one class period.

Afterwards, I went through the questions, picked what I thought was the best and most unique question from each pair, and typed up a master list consisting of the spokesperson's name next to their question. You will probably find, as I did, that 60% of the questions from each pair are pretty much the same as all the other students, but at least one or two will be unique enough to stand out. I made some small edits to the questions for clarity or to differentiate ones that were too similar. Quick tip: think about the order of questions on your master list. You will likely run out of time before all them can be asked, so feel free to put the strongest questions at the front of the line.

The calm before the storm.

In my classroom, I am fortunate enough to have a 55" Mondopad, which is basically a giant touchscreen computer / HDTV monitor with a HD webcam on top. In addition, I have a projector hooked up to my desktop computer. On the day of the Skype, I arranged my desks and supplemented the seating with folding chairs. I tested where a student could stand to ask their question and not get their head cut off by the webcam, marking an X on the floor with tape. Lastly, I projected on the screen the master list of questions so students could see the order of the upcoming questions and who was asking them. (I also printed off a copy of the questions so students could have it in their hand when talking to Ian.)   The appointed time came, we signed onto Skype on the Mondopad, and the session began!

Ian Doescher, mid-Skype.

The session was a great learning experience. Ian regaled us with several readings from his books (which, by the way, included a darn fine Obi-Wan McGregor impersonation) before turning over the mic to our students. I was proud of how they handled themselves -- the lesson was controlled by them, asking questions about things they were curious about, in their own voices. Indeed, for a bunch of freshmen students, they maturely asked questions of a *New York Times* bestselling author that could stand toe-to-toe with the insightful inquiries of a *Vanity Fair* interviewer. (I should add that out of our master list of nearly two dozen student questions, we barely had time for half.) The 45 minutes flew by faster than a Millennium Falcon Kessel Run, and we said our goodbyes.

So what did our chat with Ian Doescher teach the teacher? Although I have only Skyped a few times in my classroom, I have picked up some strategies. In honor of the upcoming seventh movie in the *Star Wars* saga, I offer 7 tips to consider when preparing to Skype:

1. **Do a technical rehearsal.** Find out in advance if you are going to have any problems with your school network or equipment. Make sure to Skype with your other party several days before the planned session, using the same room and computer equipment you plan to use for the session. Changing rooms, or from a desktop to an iPad, can affect lighting visibility, sound quality, and buffering issues on Skype video and/or audio. You never know what technical snafu you might diagnose and prevent. The first time I practiced a Skype with Ian, I discovered my microphone was somehow off in the Skype settings; an easy fix, but one that would have rattled my nerves if I found out on the session day.

2. **Discuss the format of the session.** Will your person do readings? Show objects to the camera? Sing a song? Is there time for students to ask questions? By the time of our Skype session, Ian was already a seasoned veteran of webcamming with classrooms. He had a planned presentation all timed out, and had no problem adjusting for a Q & A in the second half -- because we discussed this in advance. Your speaker may not be as experienced, and might appreciate your help in setting up an agenda. Don't just "wing it," assume the speaker is prepared, or "see what happens."

3. **Make sure the Skype is interactive.** The first time I did a Skype session, we had a very knowledgeable and wonderful speaker, but the person's presentation was way too long for the time allotted. I finally had to politely stop the person just to get a few student questions in before we had to sign off. This was first an issue of my bad planning (see #2), but also demonstrates that a Skype should be different from other media presentations. If a speaker could simply record their presentation and you could play the video for your students, there's no need to Skype! The more the students talk back and forth in Skype, the better. Like all good education technology, try to see how it transforms your teaching rather than simply substituting one media for another.

4. **Set expectations and prepare the students.** The younger the students are, the more that proper behavior during a Skype must be discussed and modeled beforehand. In addition, capitalize on student excitement while minimizing their anxiety of talking to strangers on the other side of the camera. Preparing my master list of questions and projecting them on the screen was one way of minimizing anxiety, and also avoided having students improvise questions which may have been repetitive, unfocused, or inappropriate.

5. **Be the moderator and facilitator, not the star.** Your role is to introduce the speaker to the class and vice versa, occasionally ask follow up questions, and like a good TV host, set up each student's question: "Next up, Marissa would like to ask you a question about the writing process." Make this as student-centered of a lesson as possible. Physically step back from the webcam, move around the room to put out any behavioral fires, and try to make student talk at least as significant as the teacher talk.

6. **Promote the session!** Before, after, and maybe even *during* the session, let your principal, district educators, parents, and the world know what you're doing. You are a

teacher going above and beyond to bring an authentic learning experience to students using 21st century technology -- blare the trumpets. Email, tweet and Instagram about the session. Tell other teachers about it, and encourage them to try Skyping, too.

7. **Thank the speaker.** A person taking time out of a busy schedule to talk with a classroom (especially for free!) is a generous act, and students learn proper etiquette by recognizing this and offering their gratitude. After our session, the students wrote a huge thank you on the whiteboard and signed their (first only!) names. I took a picture and tweeted it to Ian via my account @watsonedtech.

I certainly hope my tips and experience encourage you to try out some telecommunicating soon. May the Skype be with you!

For more information on Skype in the Classroom, visit their website.

For my William Shakespeare's Star Wars *unit overview,* **click here**.