Chapter 1
Designing Writing Tasks in Google Docs that Encourage Conversation: An Inquiry into Feedback and Revision

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores how a high school teacher's design of writing tasks in Google Docs encouraged conversations and revisions in student writing. It details how Adam, chapter author and an English teacher in an integrated studies course, developed various scaffolds to improve feedback, including assigning self-annotation “conversation starters” in one class and participating in writing processes as an author himself in another class. Peer conversations in Google Docs were used for two purposes in the former class—to encourage the writer to revise or to affirm the writer, and for two purposes in the latter class—to debate the writer’s techniques or to talk about the writer. The findings highlight instances where conversations were more and less successful, and explore possible reasons for the classes’ different conversation types in Google Docs. This chapter concludes with research, teaching and learning implications for K-12 teachers using Google Docs to support feedback and revision.

INTRODUCTION
Writing instruction that uses peer feedback has the potential to encourage conversations about writing, and to increase the quantity and types of classroom language that students use (Freedman, 1992; Gere & Abbott, 1985), metacognitive reflection and revision. Research has found that students, in their feedback, affirm more than teachers do and offer fewer revision strategies (Beason, 1993; Simmons, 2003). Students using computer-mediated environments, however, give more extended and specific
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peer feedback for revision than students engaged in face-to-face feedback, who often speak more globally and focus on surface features of language (Ellis, 2011; Honeycutt, 2001).

Even with peer feedback, students tend to do mostly proofreading or word-level revision (Beason, 1993; Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Flower, Hayes, Carey, Schriver, & Stratman, 1986), and they find high-level, abstract revision processes challenging (Hayes & Chenoweth, 2006; McCutchen, 2000). Particularly in light of this research on peer response, revision and technology-supported writing, we (the authors, Becca and Adam) became interested in whether and how feedback mechanisms in Google Docs, a free Web-based office suite offered in Google Drive that allows users to collaborate as they create and edit live documents, could help build conversations and encourage revisions in student writing.

BACKGROUND

Today’s technologies are changing the way that writers work together. With a call for collaboration by the U.S. Department of Education’s national educational technology plan (2010), and the Common Core State Standards galvanizing this emphasis, teachers are seeking ways to develop students’ cooperative composing practices. A recent Pew Research Center study of Advanced Placement and National Writing Project teachers supports this shift, with “96% agree[ing] that digital technologies allow students to share their work with a wider and more varied audience” and “79% agree[ing] that these tools encourage greater collaboration among students’” (Buchanan, Friedrich & Purcell, 2013 p.2). The study goes on to report concerns about student writing and feedback. Of the 2,067 middle and high school teachers surveyed, 37% believed students’ abilities to give constructive feedback on peer writing were fair, and 13% rated these skills as poor.

In response to such national and curricular initiatives, students’ classroom writing, and a proliferation of collaborative features in digital writing tools, teachers are challenged to better design technology-facilitated writing instruction and collaborative writing practices. After briefly reviewing the evolution of word processing and providing a framework for teachers to view the integration of digital writing tools in classrooms, we share our study of peer feedback practices using a collaborative writing tool in a technology-rich classroom.

Evolution of Word Processing: Toward a Truly Live Text

Technologies used for writing have gone through many evolutions. The use of the word processor, for example, fundamentally changed higher education’s approach to research writing and writing instruction because of innovations in editing and revision (Ehrmann 2011). Today, consumers expect many of the features of a word processor on their cellular or mobile devices. The nature of word processing has continued to change with the development of Web 2.0 tools that promote production and sharing across the borderless Internet (O’Reilly, 2005). Since the introduction of Google Apps online productivity suite to Google users in 2007 (Glotzbach, 2009), Google Docs has remained a top choice for writers who author texts synchronously or want to collaborate on their work with others. Synchronous authoring and feedback (through inserted comments and live conversation functions) as well as a robust revision history that automatically saves drafts redefine the act of writing and re-envision the concept of a finite page that has only one copy (or one electronic version on one physical machine). In Google Docs, texts are omnipresent: multiple users can view multiple