Chapter 17
Supporting Young Writers through the Writing Process in a Paperless Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors describe fifth-grade students’ perceptions of how digital tools support writing instruction in a paperless classroom. Extending a constructivist paradigm that embraces student-centered pedagogies, this study explores both the teacher’s approach as well as the students’ perceptions of the digital process approach to writing. An overview of each stage of the writing process is provided that includes research supporting digital writing tools for that stage. This is followed by the findings from each section which includes: 1) how the teacher implemented the digital writing tools, and 2) the students’ perceptions of the digital tools. The chapter concludes by offering areas of future research as well as offering the limitations of the study.

INTRODUCTION

The literacy research community has currently been focusing on K-12 writing (Shanahan, 2012), partially stemming from students not performing well on writing assessments (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Graham & Perin, 2007) and partially resulting from the increasing global literacy demands of a digital society (Friedman, 2005). Addressing these concerns, mandates from policy makers such as the National Organization Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2011), International Reading Association (2009), National Council Teachers of English (2008), and the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) outline how K-12 classrooms should foster collaboration, critical literacy practices, and technology integration.

Despite these mandates, many teachers are unaware of efficient ways to use technology to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5982-7.ch017
teach writing (Bauer & Kenton, 2005; Hutchison & Reinking, 2010). Although there is a growing body of literature related to how secondary classrooms are using technology for writing instruction (Callahan & King, 2011; Sweeney, 2010), few studies focus on elementary grades (Foley & Guzzetti, 2012). This is problematic because “new literacies instruction not only is necessary and appropriate for young children but it will define their future” (Forzani & Leu, 2012, p. 421). Addressing the need for research with elementary students, this chapter provides a case study of digital tools used to teach writing in a fifth-grade paperless classroom.

**PERSPECTIVES**

This study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) that embraces a shift away from teacher-centered classrooms to a learning environment where students explore and discover through social interactions with others. We also view the digital learning environment as an extension of such paradigms, agreeing with sociolinguistics (Gee, 2007; New London Group, 1996) that the social practices of society influence the ways literacy is created and valued. As Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, and Henry (2004) contend, understanding Internet practices “has become this generation’s defining technology for literacy in our global community” (p. 1159). Likewise, this study considers that when technology is merged with constructivist classrooms, the resulting practice reflects an “insider mindset” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005), transforming not only “what is to be learned,” but also “how it is to be learned” (p. 93; italics in original). Thus, adding digital tools to constructivist classrooms provide new avenues for students to engage with one another and reflect on their learning in ways that traditional classrooms cannot. For example, online discussion forums offer authentic contexts for students to share their views with others and reflect on their learning while at the same time eliminating the intimidation of face-to-face conversation by creating “safe space” for sharing viewpoints (Martin-Stanley, 2007). Additionally, digital tools within constructivist classrooms extend “participatory cultures” (Callahan & King, 2011; Jenkins, 2009) within larger classroom and school contexts by positioning students as both creators and distributors of knowledge.

Not only do these shifts transform classroom practice, but they also highlight key differences between composing online and composing with pen and paper. First, the definition of text is expanded in digital contexts to include video, images, and other forms of media (Kress, 2003). Similarly, multimodalities or multiple modes of expressing ideas (Bogard & McMackin, 2012; Ranker, 2008) can be expressed through digital composition. These multimodalities include the use of hyperlinks to supply additional information, fonts to convey varying tones, and other text features such as italics to emphasis meaning in new ways. Finally, composing online differs from print composition through the inclusion of an expanded audience. As computer-mediated communications (Palmquist, 2003) grow in number, students have greater opportunities to discuss their written products within larger communities of practice beyond the walls of the classroom. Thus, the advancement of technology not only creates differences in the ways that texts are produced, but also requires new understandings of the digital environments in which students and teachers participate.

Although there are many differences between the composition of online texts and print-based texts, both mediums allow for students to follow the stages of the writing process. Although the process approach to writing is well grounded in the literature (Graves, 1994; Moffett, 1981; Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, Reffitt, & Raphael-Bogaert, 2007; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007) and even though a few recent studies have examined the effectiveness of using emerging digital tools during the process (Anderson, Goode, Mitchell &