Chapter 20

Real World Writing with Digital Prompts

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ABSTRACT

Students are entering 21st century classrooms with widely varying technological aptitudes. Almost no student is technologically illiterate and many are more adept digitally than their teachers. Teachers must learn to utilize technology to inspire and support learning. Utilizing different digital tools will allow teachers to differentiate learning to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms while continuing to teach the curricula prescribed by their districts and state agencies. This chapter examines the use of digital technologies in the 21st century classroom to enhance writing skills. Several technologies are highlighted with examples of how they were integrated in the classroom as well further extensions of the activities.

REAL WORLD WRITING WITH DIGITAL PROMPTS

Technology is here to stay in our schools. Benchmarks for its use and mastery are woven into the new Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. As teachers we must learn to embrace technology in all its forms and learn to integrate it into our classrooms. No longer can teachers be satisfied with web searches, email or basic word skills. Students arriving in our buildings have used technology since they could use their hands. They know how to surf the web, create documents, read books, watch movies and listen to music. Many also know how to communicate with friends and navigate complex interactive games and other systems. In order to keep pace with our students, we must use the technology to engage their interests as well as teach the content that we are required and give them the additional skills and knowledge they will need to become self-sufficient adults.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5982-7.ch020
BACKGROUND

Today’s students are learning in a different environment than in the past and with more—and continuously changing—tools than ever before. The students of this generation have been raised in a digital age and have been exposed to technology from the day they were born. They are “digital natives.” (Prensky, 2001).

According to Prensky, digital natives speak the digital language and are able to multi-task on several technologies at one time. They spend more time on social media (i.e., gaming, Facebook, etc.) than they do on academics.

This could have significant impact on their performance in the classroom. According to some researchers, children being raised in the digital age think differently. Their brains have been shown to be wired in ways which run counter to the thinking processes taught in school. Traditional approaches to instruction rely on linear thinking, in which each thought builds upon the one that preceded it. Long practice with video games, text messaging and the internet has trained students to think in parallel processes, jumping from one thought to another while still maintaining “presence” in other processes (Prensky, 2001; Winn, 1997, Moore, 1997).

If technology is changing the way students think and learn, then schools and teachers must change along with them. No longer is it acceptable for students to be expected to “turn off and power down” when they enter the school doors. If the technology they have been exposed to since birth is part of their everyday life, why have we as teachers not made it part of our everyday instruction? Perhaps it is because teachers, most of whom are “digital immigrants,” still are afraid of the technology. By now most teachers use email and internet search engines and Teacher Tube or YouTube, but most of these are what Tim O’Reilly called, in 2004, Web 1.0. They are digital simulacra of pre-digital technologies, and minimally interactive, if at all. Today’s digital generation has come of age with what O’Reilly called Web 2.0: wikis, blogs, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr and other websites that encourage users to interact with one another in a community-like setting. These sites provide users with a transactional relationship, encouraging them to read, think critically and respond, just as students do in a classroom setting. Users are accessing them on a new generation of devices: smart phones, tablets and e-readers that put Web 2.0, quite literally, in the palms of their hands.

As they master these new sites and new devices in order to create instruction that will engage and inspire their digital native students, teachers need to consider the learning environment and how to approach instruction. Assessment is a key concern and one that should not be left out of the process. Teachers should not assume that all students have the same level of technological mastery. Not every student comes to the classroom with the same experiences with technology. Lessons should be designed around what the students know about the content and what technology is appropriate to integrate in order to assist with conveying the material. Assessments of student learning are designed into lessons and assignments that utilize technology should measure student mastery of the technologies themselves. Looking to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the technology that is integrated throughout will help teachers make this transition more easily.

Integrating new technologies into the classroom is always challenging for teachers, especially during times when many changes are already taking place. Common challenges include acquiring the technology, securing administrative and technical support and finding time to attend training and professional developments. The objectives of this chapter are to increase teachers’ knowledge of digital literacies through a brief overview of various technologies that we have used in our classrooms; show how to integrate technology within writing instruction with examples from our classrooms; and offer teachers simple ideas with user-friendly resources to create a 21st century