Chapter 23
Online Peer Conferencing in Four Different Educational Settings: Practices and Insights

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ABSTRACT

As the world becomes more digital and more connected, teachers must keep pace with the changing spaces of the workplace and processes of community and civic engagement. These changes are not going away. It is the responsibility of educators to help students navigate, create and problem-solve within these spaces. This chapter investigates one of the processes undertaken by four teachers, elementary through university, as they worked towards creating a vibrant digital classroom. Specifically, it addresses the challenges, systems and successes of facilitating meaningful online peer response within the context of writer’s workshop. Ultimately, these educators found that authentic audience and thoughtful peer response improved student writing.

INTRODUCTION

The Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered that 94% of teens use the Internet occasionally and 85% of teens twelve to seventeen years old use some form of electronic personal communication, from email, text messaging, and/or posting comments on social networking sites (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). In fact, the research suggests that adolescents form the backbone of social networks, including Facebook, Instagram, and Spotify and are involved in

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a variety of online gaming. These online spaces foster collaboration and interactions with others through writing.

Writing workshop is one well-documented model that requires students to use collaborative skills and strategies similar to those they are developing in online spaces outside of the classroom. Collaboration and feedback, a vital part of a writing workshop model and online communities, are key elements of peer conferencing. Using online peer conferencing as an integral part of writing workshop may help students see applicability of skills learned in school as well as further develop their writing abilities and prepare them to become active participants in the world outside of school (Prensky, 2006). Yet, research suggests that while online peer conferencing may be an effective tool for improving students’ writing (Simmons, 2003) it can be difficult to implement (Brammer & Rees, 2007).

In this chapter, we highlight our experiences, discoveries, and conflicts, using digital tools to support students’ peer conferencing. Using a case study approach (Yin, 2003), we describe our individual contexts, how we implemented digital tools in our classrooms, and what we learned through our work with students. We conclude with recommendations and reflections for other educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Workshop Approach

The writing workshop model is based on the belief that writing is a process and that writers need the time and space to engage in writing (Calkins, 1986). Teachers who engage their students in the writing workshop approach not only focus on each step of the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publication, but they also focus on the writer. Hence the mantra of many writing workshop advocates is “teach the writer, not the writing.” Because many students already use savvy Web 2.0 tools to communicate socially at home (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008), teachers must modify traditional writing workshop methods in order to best meet the interests, abilities, and experiences of their students. Principles of the writing workshop: student choice, revision, publication and a focus on process, can be enhanced by a variety of digital tools and online writing opportunities (Hicks, 2009). For example, digital tools such as blogs, wikis, and VoiceThread can provide students a platform in which to collaborate, conference, and publish their writing.

Wikis and Blogs

A wiki is an online tool that enables multiple people to collaborate and respond to each other’s writing (Hicks, 2009). Wikis are especially useful for supporting peer feedback and collaborative writing because writers can share their work with others, view updated revisions, and carry on conversations with responders through a discussion forum. The history page allows the writer or responders the opportunity to view previously saved versions of the main wiki page. As the writer saves versions of his text, the older versions are automatically archived in this history and different versions can be compared with one another. Teachers and students can reflect on these revisions and discuss the revision process in more detail, pointing out specific improvements and the overall quality of a text.

The discussion page of a wiki allows writers, peers, and the teacher to share comments and suggestions about a specific text. All of these responses can be noted and archived so that the writer can go back and review them, even after he has made revisions to the original document. This interactive space can also be used for collaborative writing where multiple writers can author a single page or piece of writing. Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com/) has reliable, user-friendly, ad-free spaces for K-12 educators.
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