Chapter 7
Self-Efficacy and Persistence in a Digital Writing Classroom: A Case Study of Fifth-Grade Boys

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing a New Literacies perspective, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the digital writing experiences of one classroom of fifth-grade boys. Research questions for this study included the following: (1) What features of the digital writing environment impact student expressions of confidence in their abilities as writers? (2) How do expressions of confidence align with performance for students who are the least persistent in digital writing tasks? (3) How do expressions of confidence align with performance for students who are the most persistent in digital writing tasks? Through an embedded analysis, eight confidence features were identified. Compared against a holistic analysis of individual focal student experiences, this chapter provides two student vignettes to illustrate the differences between high-persisting and low-persisting students in a digital writing classroom.

In order to succeed, people need a sense of self-efficacy, to struggle together with resilience to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life. Albert Bandura

INTRODUCTION

Many students today spend large portions of their days in digital spaces. From new advances in virtual reality devices to the ever-present barrage of social media notifications, students can easily and affordably connect with anyone, anywhere at any time. While some researchers have argued the accessibility of technology has brought new opportunities for addressing concerns related to a “digital gap” between high performing and low performing students (Morrisett, 2001), researchers over the last decade have reported that the problem of the digital divide is no longer only about how to give students greater ac-

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cess to technology, but also how to teach students to use technology to both read and construct meaning within these digital contexts (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Warschauer, Zheng, Niiya, Cotten, & Farkas, 2014). New skills needed for these digital contexts have further extended the definition of the “digital divide” to include a “skills divide” (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). Such a gap in skills from participatory digital culture requires special considerations for educational decisions, as Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, and Weigel (2006) have contended,

The school system’s inability to close this participation gap has negative consequences for everyone involved. On the one hand, those youth who are most advanced in media literacies are often stripped of their technologies and robbed of their best techniques for learning in an effort to ensure a uniform experience for all in the classroom. On the other hand, many youth who have had no exposure to these kinds of participatory cultures outside school find themselves struggling to keep up with their peers. (p. 13)

One way to explore the digital skills gap is to explore writing self-efficacy within a digital learning environment. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability (confidence) to achieve a specified target and provides a powerful predictor for future performance. The current study explores the nature of boys’ self-efficacy when participating in digital writing experiences from perspectives informed by New Literacies Theory (NLT), the body of research seeking to explore the literacy practices created by emerging digital technologies such as blogs, message systems, virtual gaming communities, social networking sites, and a host of continually evolving technologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cocapardo, 2009). Specifically important to the educational context, new literacies embody a nuanced skill set for interpreting information from the Internet and other communication technologies (Kiili, Laurinen, & Marttunen, 2008). Moreover, new literacies extend the definition of traditional literacies as online reading is seen as an increasingly collaborative, social practice (Zawilinski, 2009). Echoing previous sociocultural frameworks for interpreting the social nature of learning and the meaning-making process (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1991), such understandings of digital writing experiences are linked to social practices within individual contexts.

Background

Digital writing has gained attention in recent years within the field of writing research, reflecting the growing use of digital writing both inside and outside of the classroom (Anderson, Goode, Mitchell, & Thompson, 2013; Wollscheid, 2016). Research in digital composition in school contexts originally focused on email exchanges among students and cultural writing exchanges during school experiences, highlighting the importance of the role of audience in digital writing experiences (Fabos & Young, 1999; Riel & Levin, 1990). Other studies have since reviewed the role of word processing (Wolfe, Bolton, Felitovich, & Niday, 1996) and assistive technologies for writing achievement in school (MacArthur, 1998; MacArthur, Graham, Haynes, & DeLaPaz, 1996). These studies focused on the effectiveness of technology for improving students’ writing achievement, but often found technology was only one component in a larger contextual environment. For example, in Rogers and Graham’s (2008) meta-analysis of word processing tools used for revision, they argued that the use of word processing tools alone did not support higher revisions as “the effects are largely dependent on the context in which word processing is used” (p. 251). According to a review of more recent research on early writing development comparing pen and paper with digital tools, new research methodologies are needed to meet the complex context of an
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