Chapter 8
Illuminating Change:
Technology, Feedback, and Revision in Writing

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ABSTRACT

Using the method of a formative experiment, this investigation examines how the use of peer revision and collaboration in an online environment, specifically a social network, could be implemented in a middle school classroom to increase revision over multiple drafts and improve the quality of student expository writing. Thirty-six students in two sections of a seventh-grade English language arts class participated in the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected prior to, during, and after the intervention to establish baseline data, as well as determine progress toward the pedagogical goal. Analyses reveal improvement in the amount of student revision and quality of student writing, as well as improved peer feedback using an online community for peer revision and collaboration. The enhancing and inhibiting effects of technology in this intervention is examined, as well as the unanticipated effects of the intervention.

INTRODUCTION

As digital technologies have changed, so has writing. Web 2.0 tools are in common use and, as part of an increasingly participatory culture, we are all creators of media for public consumption (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009; Yancey, 2009). According to research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 95% of teens are now online with 70% of teens taking the time to go online daily (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr, & Rainie, 2011). Teens are active users of social networking sites, with 80% of teens actively engaged in some kind of online social media (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr, & Rainie). Therefore, most teenagers aged twelve to seventeen are using some form of electronic personal communication, from sending email to text messaging to posting comments on social networks. Many online spaces foster collaboration and interaction with others through writing, yet, for students, the literacy of their
everyday lives, or out-of-school literacy, and the literacy valued in schools is not always apparent (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009; Tyner, 1998). Further, teachers may not view students’ out-of-school literacy skills, specifically the writing skills students engage in outside of school, as sufficiently rigorous (Williams, 2005).

Thus, critical questions concerning writing instruction in adolescent education remain. For example, how can educators effectively engage students in writing? How can teachers help students develop as readers and writers and prepare them with skills necessary in the 21st century and relevant to their out-of-school lives? These questions were considered as we designed this study. Studying online and digital technologies is one relevant method to address 21st century skills. Also, the writing workshop model is inherently collaborative, and activity focused on peer revision holds promise to improve students’ critical writing skills. Capitalizing on collaborative online environments during peer revision may be a promising method to engage students in writing. Our study, which was conducted as a formative experiment, considered an intervention, which used a collaborative online writing environment to support peer revision in a middle-school classroom. This chapter describes our methods, the intervention and its implementation, and our findings to discuss the effectiveness of the intervention in the setting in which our study was conducted. First, we consider the relative literature and theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning to write is a process deeply entwined in the social and emotional growth of learners (Bomer & Laman, 2004). It is situated and authentically embedded within activity, context and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991), grounding much of the research on writing in socio-cultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory asserts that learning depends upon people’s interactions with one another; learning is a social act and culture provides the tools that help learners develop understandings of the world around them. A cultural historical theoretical view of learning is sometimes used to capture the complexities of classroom environments (Guiterrez & Stone, 2000). This theoretical perspective embraces the notion that learning is a transactional process (Dewey & Bentley, 1949) mediated by cultural tools, including spoken and written language, as people participate in routine activities in communities of practice (Dyson, 2000; Guiterrez & Stone, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Communities of Practice (COPs) are knowledge communities in which people invest their time and energy in a joint enterprise, developing a shared repertoire (Henderson & Bradley, 2008). Gee (2005) describes Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice as one in which learners “…pick up practices through joint action with more advanced peers, and advance their abilities to engage and work with others in carrying out such practices” (p. 77). Learners draw on their own Discourses (i.e., home, community, academic) and as members participate in the community, a new, shared Discourse emerges (Gee, 2005).

PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study particularly focused on peer revision in the writing process in an online setting. Teaching students how to successfully respond to peers’ text, as well as to read and understand critiques of their own work, and provides adolescents with the skills they will need to move forward, both in academic environments and in the larger world. Revision gives students the opportunity to not only re-examine their own ideas, but also examine and internalize elements of effective writing in a variety of contexts (Bruffee, 1985). Although peer revision is an important component of the