Chapter 9
Situating Technology-Facilitated Feedback and Revision: The Case of Tom

Sarah J. McCarthey
University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, USA

Alecia Marie Magnifico
University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, USA

Rebecca Woodard
University of Illinois – Chicago, USA

Sonia Kline
University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present a case study of one writer, Tom, to uncover how his writing was mediated by school-level and individual factors. The online writing environment had three major affordances for Tom in this 8th grade classroom: the online writing environment increased Tom’s access to peer response, motivated him write to a higher standard for an audience, and both scaffolded and increased his response repertoire. However, the larger policy context in which Tom’s writing was embedded placed constraints on the classroom and school. Other constraints included Tom’s lack of access to a computer at home, the teacher’s highly structured task, and the online tool’s assignment of random reviewers that forced Tom to continually write to a new audience of peers who lacked the previous context. In light of the situated nature of Tom’s writing and responses in this classroom, the authors make recommendations for policy, research, and instruction.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4341-3.ch009
INTRODUCTION

Writers learn by writing, but they also learn by externalizing their thinking as they commit words to paper or screen and by participating in larger institutions like classrooms and schools. By responding to iterative drafts, peers and teachers can help writers to identify which ideas are clear and which require additional explanation. Writers can then revise in response to these comments to produce more coherent texts. Interactions that surround the writing, reviewing, and revising of texts can produce a more collaborative environment. Designing an online environment that organizes revision and supports interaction, particularly among peers, lies at the center of our work. In this chapter, we trace one student using Scholar, a Web-based writing tool, through a six-week narrative project that involved writing, peer review, annotation, and revision.

Simply analyzing online artifacts of these activities, however, only shows one aspect of students’ and teachers’ experiences of the writing process. Equally important are teachers’ pedagogies, and how their instructional design is enmeshed in such factors as school and federal policies. Teachers design writing curricula and assessment in response to their students’ needs, but also in response to accountability and curricular mandates. In the classroom that we discuss in this chapter, the teacher, Ellen Anderson, implemented Scholar to enhance her students’ experiences with writing but encountered challenges that limited their access to technology.

We examine the affordances and constraints of Scholar to support writing, peer review, annotation, and revision within classroom and school contexts. We also look at peer response as a mechanism of formative assessment that distributes feedback throughout the classroom, recasting the teacher in the role of guide (rather than sole assessor) and the students as active audience members. While online writing environments have the potential to enable a shift from the traditional classroom to a more collaborative one, Tom’s case demonstrates the complex, situated nature of this transformation and how it is enacted.

In this chapter, we review relevant literature on technology policy and computer-mediated instruction as it relates to writing, peer response, and revision. We then present a case study of one writer, Tom, to uncover how his writing was mediated by school-level and individual factors such as his ambitious ideas for his story, the structure of Ellen’s assignment and rubric, and his access to Scholar in and out of school. These influences supported and constrained Tom’s writing in divergent ways. In light of the situated nature of his writing and responses in this classroom, we make recommendations for policy, research, and instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our inquiry into the use of Scholar, a technology-enabled classroom-writing tool, is informed by a situated view of teachers’ instruction and students’ learning. Such activity occurs within broad layers of context including federal, local, and school policy.

Scholar intervenes in educational systems at the level of classrooms, as an instruction-focused tool that aims to help teachers transform their classrooms into places where students write primarily to communicate about real problems and purposes -- rather than to write summaries and answer questions (e.g. Applebee & Langer, 2009; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). As Kalantzis and Cope (2012) put it, classrooms are currently oriented “vertically,” with teachers serving as students’ assessors and sole audience members, but they might be transformed to include more “horizontal, student-to-student” (p. 162) discourse. To this end, they offer seven design principles that are central to Scholar. We focus on three of these principles here: The first of these elements is ubiquitous learning, which