

Developing Better Writers

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Introduction by Punya & Matt

It gives us great pleasure to introduce the third article for our regular series on contemporary educational research and its implications for practice. This column is by Chris Sloan a classroom teacher and doctoral student in the College of Education at Michigan State University. This column focuses on literacy and specifically issues related to supporting better writing in the classroom.

Not long ago being literate meant the ability to read and write printed text with some level of proficiency. Traditionally in schools this meant being able to read critically, research thoroughly, and compose coherent arguments and narratives.

With the increasing spread of information communication technologies, scholars now speak of *new literacies*. New literacies are generally thought to be texting, blogging, participation in social networks, and other skills necessary to make meaning in a technology-rich, digitally connected world. Our students are used to choosing topics that they're passionate about, and audiences expect interaction and collaboration with the writer.

When it comes to literacy, Lankshear and Knobel (2006) speak of two distinct mindsets. Mindset 1 holds that "the world is much the same as before, only now it is more technologized, or technologized in more sophisticated ways." Mindset 2, the post-Industrial mindset, holds that "the world is very different than before, largely as a result of the emergence and uptake of digital electronic inter-networked technologies." The authors conclude: "we think that for the foreseeable future, the people who are best equipped in literacy terms will be those who can move between conventional epistemologies and digital epistemologies."

What this means for educators today is that new literacies don't replace traditional ones; our students must master traditional, print-based literacy while learning the affordances of new literacies.

Students are writing more than ever

However literacy is defined, it is clear that our students are now

writing more than ever. Their texts, tweets, and status updates add up to a staggering amount of compositions. Some educators think this is leading to a decline in overall writing skills, but others like Andrea Lunsford of Stanford University feel that we're in the midst of a literary revolution the likes of which hasn't been seen since Classical Greek civilization.

According to Lunsford, technology isn't killing our ability to write, it's reviving it.

The Connected Learning Initiative from the MacArthur Foundation is at the forefront of researching how youths are incorporating these new literacies into their lives and is "a model of learning that holds out the possibility of reimagining the experience of education in the information age." It draws on the power of today's technology to fuse young people's interests, friendships, and academic achievement through experiences laced with hands-on production, shared purpose, and open networks. Kathleen Yancey, past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, argues that we need to make sure that educators don't create a "firewall" between students' in-class and out-of-class writing.

Wisely incorporating these new literacies has a significant role in developing better student writers. As students gain more access to mobile devices and tablets, educators are increasingly using these technologies in schools. According to Warschauer (2007), students feel like they're becoming better writers by having an authentic audience and purpose for their writing in computer-mediated writing.

Writing for authentic audiences

This shift of mindsets that Lankshear and Knobel describe means that we need to move away from the concept of the teacher as the primary audience for the student. One way to do this is to have students write for the authentic audiences that inhabit these new media spaces. For some teachers this means going where the students already are, repurposing popular social networks for educational purposes.

Marcie Lewis, a 4th-grade teacher in Ontario, Canada, brings experts

into her classroom for her students to interact with via Skype, YouTube, and Google Hangouts. Lewis says that having her students conduct interviews with those experts helps improve their writing “because they are more invested in the process and wanting to accurately share the information that they have learned. I think they are also empowered to take ownership over the process because there is real meaning in the task.” Media outlet KQED in San Francisco provides resources for students to practice civic engagement and digital citizenship skills in writing and conversations around current events using Twitter in their Do Now program. <http://education.kqed.org/edspace/category/do-now/>

Another way to bring educational social networking into the classroom is to use spaces that have been created by educators specifically with student writers in mind. Some colleagues from the National Writing Project and I have developed a site called youthvoices.net where students from around the U.S. and the world discuss their digital compositions and connect their school learning with their interests outside of school. At Youth Voices, students blog about their research projects or discuss local and global issues.

Educator Kim Cofino highlights many examples of international collaborations that students have participated in at her school using blogs, wikis, VoiceThread, and Ning social networks at <http://kimcofino.com/isb/>. Even the youngest elementary students at Cofino’s school have published multimedia projects and have collaborated with other youths thousands of miles away.

Public and private writing

Yet despite all this talk of connected learning and international collaborations, teachers need to remember that oftentimes the most powerful ways to improve student writing can happen locally, in a classroom without computers or the internet. The Young People’s Writing in 2011, a survey conducted by the UK’s National Literacy Trust, has found that all students benefit from the private kind of writing that can happen with teachers in the classroom. To assume



that all students are savvy in digital environments can be a big mistake. According to the report:

An important self-development strategy uncovered in the children’s reports was the need to ‘practise your private confidence’ before you could develop ‘public confidence’.

Children identified reading aloud and writing as activities requiring ‘public confidence’, and needed a lot of ‘private’ practice. A striking characteristic of children from affluent backgrounds was how easy it was for them to access opportunities for ‘private confidence’ building whereas children from low-income backgrounds had little, if any, opportunity for this (10).

Finally, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that developing writers is everybody’s business, according to the report “Writing and School Reform: a Report of the U.S. National Commission on Writing.” This is not a simple and easy task, or something that will be finished and out of the way by the end of next week, or even the end of next year. “Developing critical thinkers and writers should be understood as one of the central works of education. State and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels. Writing should be considered every teacher’s responsibility.”

There are many opportunities to use new technologies to communicate and collaborate with students from around the world in educational networks and social media, but students still need the mentorship of classroom teachers who are well versed in traditional and new literacies.

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