

When Writing with
Technology
Matters



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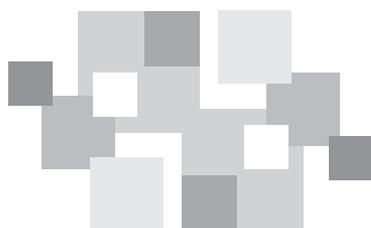
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Introduction

Texting on cell phones, listening to music on ipods, surfing the net on laptop computers, updating profiles on Facebook. Who are these people? They are the digital natives—young people who have been “plugged in” their entire lives. These are our students today—the twenty-first-century students who allowed us to pull up a chair, eavesdrop on their classroom conversations, chat with them, and learn *about* them . . . *from* them.

This is a book about writing. Specifically, it’s a book about the settings that allow students to become invested—engrossed even—in writing. It’s also about how our students today are wired to use technology as a tool in learning to become writers. Technology changes the writing process—and ultimately changes the writer. This is a book about writing and technology, because for the digital generation, they serve each other well.

Technology’s Place in the Literacy Classroom

Today a profound gap exists between the knowledge and skills most students learn in school and the knowledge and skills they need in typical twenty-first-century communities and workplaces (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2011). This is precisely why creators of language arts curricula are no longer ignoring the fact that “our schools [must] teach our students how to use technology tools to solve problems, communicate, access information, and foster lifelong learning” (Cohen and Cowen 2008, 12).

Leu (1997), more than a decade ago, warned, “Individuals unable to keep up with the information strategies generated by new information technologies will quickly be left behind” (65). In the twenty-first-century classroom, computers, networks, and multi-media are the necessary tools in addition to chalk, pen, and paper.

Technology has the capacity to allow for a broader vision of literacy instruction (Bruce 1997). Not only can students in the language arts classroom learn reading and writing, but a technologically infused curriculum can develop multiple essential literacies: technological literacy, visual literacy, informational literacy, and intertextuality (Smolin and Lawless 2003). Technological literacy is the ability to use computers and other technology to improve learning, productivity, and performance (Clinton 1997). Visual literacy is the ability to understand and produce visual messages (Avgerinou n.d.). Informational literacy refers to the ability to define, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information (Smolin and Lawless 2003). Intertextuality represents the process of comprehending one text by means of a previously encountered text (Kristeva 1984). Conceptualizing literacy in these ways transforms the classroom from solely a text-based literate environment to one that embraces multiple literacies, and the richness that comes with a technological landscape is continually evolving.

How This Book Is Organized

This book begins with ten reasons why writing with technology matters. We developed the reasons from the themes that emerged across two educational settings in which technology was seamlessly integrated into the literacy curricula.

We then provide glimpses into two literacy classrooms that integrated technology and language arts: Elementary students worked together on a filmmaking project and middle school students engaged in a cross-curriculum research project to produce a visual nonfiction essay. As we share with you what was happening and why, we will offer ideas for how technological tools can change writing instruction in your own classrooms.

Our conclusion looks across the two projects, spotlights the central ideas, and reveals what is possible when writing and technology are joined in ways that truly matter to students.



Chapter 1

Ten Reasons Why Writing with Technology Matters

Why does writing with technology matter? In our observations of two projects that integrated writing and technology in elementary and middle school classrooms, we found that, although the project activities the students engaged in were often different, the foundation and purpose of those activities united the projects. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the two projects and refer to aspects of them as we explore and explain why writing with technology matters in the classroom.

Project 1: Reading and Writing to Launch Movie-making

This moviemaking project for upper elementary students integrated technology into the language arts curriculum. The main components were:

- Reading: Students read popular chapter books and responded in literature circles and on a blog.
- Writing: Students wrote adaptations of chapter books. Supporting writing activities included posting responses on a blog, writing stories, conferring about their writing, creating Hollywood pitches to “sell” their stories, writing group stories, creating storyboards, and using scriptwriting software to format their stories as scripts.
- Moviemaking: Students assumed the roles of actors, costume and set designers, camera operators, directors, and producers. They used Windows Movie Maker and incorporated special effects.

Project 2: Authoring the Visual Nonfiction Essay

This cross-curriculum project for middle school students focused on researching the time period from the Medieval to the Post-Renaissance. The main components were:

- Reading: Students read and annotated historical fiction books, participated in literature circles, and made note of possible topics for research.

- **Researching:** Students researched their cross-curriculum topics using both print and online sources.
- **Writing:** Students wrote across genres as they used their research to create independent projects. Students also created storyboards to plan collaborative essays.
- **Videoining:** Students collaboratively produced visual nonfiction essays; using Windows Movie Maker, they converted slides made in Microsoft PowerPoint to create a video replete with special effects.

With these two projects in mind, let's talk about the real possibilities that can exist when incorporating writing with technology.

Why Writing with Technology Matters: The Ten Reasons

Why write with technology in the literacy classroom? Here are ten reasons that emerged in the two projects we observed.

1. Process matters.

By definition, a project is multistage or multistep, and project-based learning seeks to sustain students' motivation and thought for a sustained period of time so that they can understand the purposes, rationales, and connections of the steps toward the outcome or end products (Blumenfeld et al. 1991). In both projects, the integration of the language arts with technology informed these steps. That is, the intent of each project was to engage students in multiple and authentic aspects and levels of literary learning that ultimately combined and contributed to the students' goal of producing narrative and nonfiction videos.

It was moviemaking, not reading and writing, that was on the minds of elementary students as they began the integrated language arts–technology project. But students soon discovered that just like real Hollywood screenwriters, they had to first put the words on the page that could be turned into images on the big screen. Students began by reading chapter books—these books served as the basis of the story lines students developed through a number of writing activities, which included writing independently, conferring both face-to-face and online, writing collaboratively, and storyboarding. Throughout the process, the elementary students blogged about their daily activities and progress, their frustrations, and their successes, so the blog served as a record of their learning.

The middle school project also began with reading. Middle schooler Emelia offered, “Historical fiction can be educational but interesting at the same time.” That

was precisely why her teacher used historical fiction reading not only to engage students but also to provide exposure to some topics they could research.

The middle school research project required that students apply their research to projects they completed individually. Essentially, students were building a knowledge base at this stage that they could draw from later when they worked collaboratively on the visual nonfiction essay. Students realized that writing with technology presented challenges as well as capabilities that were not possible with paper and pen, and they grew as writers as a result of having to toggle between both print forms and visual forms as they synthesized their content into a cohesive whole. Therefore, reading, researching, writing independently, and writing collaboratively culminated in the students' ability to showcase their learning via the visual nonfiction essay.

In the projects, the *product* mattered, certainly, because it was a creation—a real, concrete representation of the students' efforts. But the *process* also mattered, and students became keenly aware that the product was made possible as a result of authentic stages of a complex process. And teachers became aware of what students learned by watching closely as students engaged in the process. Consequently, the products, although important, actually represented only a small part of the learning.

2. Engagement matters.

Hard work are the words that teachers and students involved in these projects used to describe what they were doing. So how is it that everyone was so willing to do so much hard work?

That's what *engagement* in the process allows. Students showed stick-to-itiveness because they were engaged in their work and viewed it as important (Hobbs 2007).

When the elementary students learned that they would be moviemakers, the excitement was palpable and audible. They knew what that meant—they could envision sitting in an auditorium crowded with family and friends, viewing a piece of work they had constructed. And when things got rough, students' desire to produce something great for others to see is what helped them push through. During filming, one student, Alonso, posted on the class blog, *We're practically all over the place doing tons of stuff. I only slept for, like, three hours and no more, because we have a ton of work to do.* Another student, Isaac, wrote, *I felt like I would finish by the time I was fifty.* Fortunately, all the elementary filmmaking groups reached deep to complete their movies for the premiere day. And on that final day, students were sure to take home DVDs of their movies because, as the teachers reported, they wanted to post them on YouTube.

The fact is, projects such as these allow for students to sustain their focus and attention and become invested in what they are doing. Middle school student Melissa

found that constructing the visual part of the visual nonfiction essay meant constant tinkering with technology in order to achieve the desired effects. She said in an interview, *It takes a lot of time and patience. But you need that if [the project] is going to be good.*

Engagement allows for meaningful, enduring learning.

3. Critical thinking matters.

The projects allowed students opportunities to make decisions independently and collaboratively and space to think critically and creatively when solving problems, which in turn allowed teachers insight into their students' capacities for critical thinking and meaning making when given environments that encouraged them (Swed 2001).

The nature of the projects allowed teachers to turn over the reins to the students, placing them in the roles of decision makers through and through. When constructing their visual essay, for example, middle school students Adrian, Keith, and Patrick discussed and came to agreement on a number of matters including the central focus, the font size of text, the background color, the music, the mode of narration, the need for authentic images, and the reliability and accuracy of their sources, just to name a few.

Many of the decisions the students made required them to think critically about their own work. Middle school students Chad and Jerad wrestled with finding the precise wording to capture the feeling they wanted to convey. After writing *They [the monks] rushed out to meet their unexpected guests* in their visual essay draft, they decided to give the idea more effect by adding, *but their guests have sinister intentions*. This decision required deeper, finer, specific thinking on the students' part—a level of thinking that is often not brought to daily assignments.

Many decisions the students made in these projects allowed them to tap into their creative thinking. Middle schooler Connor infused humor in his newspaper titled *The Sea of Trolls Chronicles* by including a joke section. Elementary student Gabriel re-created a televised press conference, complete with a running ticker tape.

Because the projects were designed so that the students were in charge of their own schedule, their own creations, and their own learning, they acquired many workplace skills including organization, decision making, and attention to detail. Ms. Garcia, a teacher in the elementary project, reflected in a group interview:

I think they're shaped as workers. These are intelligent children, but this is the hardest they've had to work in their educational careers. It's a commitment they have to see from the start to the finish.