Wiki Writers: Students and Teachers Making Connections Across Communities

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It is rare to see students’ faces in such excited states as they wait for their teachers to begin their classes. “Are we going to use the computer today?” they ask. “Can we read our e-mail?” These expressions of delight and anticipation are a direct result of a school-wide program designed by their teachers to develop language skills in special education students. These second graders participated in a writing project that made use of wikis to facilitate collaboration among the students, parents, teachers, and university members of their professional development school.

What we know about young students’ development is that they need opportunities to learn language through interacting with others (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). Technology use can promote social interaction, peer teaching, and collaboration (Clements & Nastasi, 1993). There is general agreement, however, that technology applications that are meaningful and integrated into classroom activities have the most potential to stimulate student enthusiasm and learning (Van Scoter & Boss, 2002). In the following project, writing and drawing software such as Photo Story and Pixie 2 and websites such as blabberize.com and earth.google.com provided open-ended opportunities to allow for active learning.

The Project

Developed by a special education teacher at West Elementary School (pseudonym), the program was planned as part of the requirements for a graduate course in educational leadership at the local university. The project evolved into a yearlong collaboration that involved writing projects, international and domestic pen pals, parent receptions, collaborations between classroom teachers and technology teachers, and impressive student achievements. “A Writing Community,” as the program was called, focused on improving the written expression skills of special education and Title I students in second grade.

Planning the project turned out to be the easy part. An interview with the West Elementary principal provided background information on the type of program needed. The technology professional development coach shared insight into the types of technology available that would enhance writing goals. Together, they determined that this group of students needed vocabulary and language development and that technology could be the conduit and motivator.

The Title I teacher, two special education teachers, and the technology coach collaborated to integrate technology and implement the monthly projects that would motivate struggling students by providing them with authentic reasons to read and write. Sixteen at-risk second graders were chosen to participate in this program. Six of these students were receiving special education services in reading and writing. Two of the special education students received speech/language therapy. The remaining students in the group received Title I intervention services. Seventy-five percent of the student participants were part of the FARM (free and reduced meals) subgroup. The group comprised 2 Hispanic, 1 African American, and 13 Caucasian students.

The teachers worked with students in small groups twice a week. Students published and shared projects on a secure wiki. A wiki is a shared online space that invites collaboration from users. On this wiki, teachers created pages for each student’s writing projects along with a page for discussions about the projects.

University students majoring in education became conversation partners in the program, participating in the discussions about wiki activities. A brochure was developed to promote the program with parents and community. Parents supported the program and participated in events celebrating student accomplishments. The PTA supported the project and provided funding for extra incentives and celebrations. To evaluate program objectives,
parent, student, and teacher surveys were prepared and administered. Assessment data and work samples have been collected to track student achievement. Month by month, students learned to write using a variety of technology applications.

**September**

Students began the year with journal writing. Students selected small stuffed animals, took them home, and wrote about their activities with their animal friends in a journal. Journal entries served as a basis for a published story on the wiki. Students shared their stories and stuffed animals with the kindergarten classes. Stories were posted on the wiki, where e-pals from the university and West Elementary faculty members engaged in a dialogue with students about their stories.

**October**

Their next project was a collaboration with students from the Somerset Junior School (pseudonym) in Cape Town, South Africa. Students individually introduced themselves with an activity called You in a Shoebox, a list of 10 items in a shoebox that explained their unique characteristics to one another. Students communicated with their assigned e-pals from South Africa.

**November**

The West Elementary students and the Cape Town students participated in an activity called My Town, where students listed local places of interest they would like to take their e-pals. Links were posted on the wiki for students to explore. Our students learned about special places and animals such as dassies, small rodents that are native to South Africa. Cape Town writers were invited to virtually visit nearby Ocean City, Maryland, USA, and Assateague Island, off the coast of Maryland and Virginia. Students continued to read, write, and learn from one another as they shared projects across continents.

**December**

With the holidays approaching, the next writing focus was poetry. Students wrote holiday poems and used Blabberize (www.blabberize.com) to record and read aloud their poems with the use of an avatar. At Blabberize, students could use any animal or figure with their poem recording. After choosing the picture, students recorded their poems. Blabberized poems and characters were posted on the wiki.

**January**

In January, students read biographies of famous people. Students also interviewed and noted information about someone they knew and admired. Then they wrote biographies about their subjects and recorded them with a digital video recorder. These were placed on the wiki space.

**February**

A PowerPoint presentation was created, and each student contributed a slide that contained an illustration and a paragraph about their families. Pixie 2, a drawing program, was used to encourage computer drawing for the illustrations. The family PowerPoint presentation and the biographies were shared with friends and families at an authors’ tea.

**March**

In March, students researched animals, and their reports were published using Photo Story. The students researched an animal of their choice online, collected data and photographs, and inserted their photos into Photo Story. These were shared with classmates and parents.

**April**

Students completed the year’s writing by conducting a virtual investigation of historical and recreational sites in the state. Field trip experiences were documented in writing, and this collection of facts was used to create a game.

Throughout the year, university students continued to send e-mails to their student pen pals in the program. Each week, they commented on the students’ writing and invited them to write back. The second graders were eager to get to class to see if they had messages from their pen pals. Toward the
end of the year, the university students and second graders used Skype to “meet” one another and discuss books that the second graders had been given by the PTA. Skype (www.skype.com) is a free Web application that allows video communication between long-distance computer users. The second graders’ writing and the resulting discussions with teachers, community members, and university students can be accessed at willardswriters.wicomico.wikispaces.net.

**Student Achievement Results**

Reading and writing are integrated disciplines. In this program, students were motivated to read and write as they actively engaged in meaningful projects and communicated daily with e-pals. Student reading progress was assessed using the county’s reading benchmark exams, which are given three times a year. At the beginning of the school year, all of the students participating in this program were working below grade level. Consequently, on the first benchmark assessment given in October, all of these students scored below expectation. By April, 50% of these students scored at or above expectation. By May 2009, every student had shown an increase of at least one reading level, and only two students were reading below grade level. By April, 50% of these students scored at or above expectation (see Figure 1).

In comparing the progress of the program group with all second grade students at West Elementary, the entire second-grade had shown only a 30% increase in the number of students achieving at or above grade level.

Student reading progress was also tracked using Houghton Mifflin’s Leveled Reading Passage Assessment. In September 2008, all of the second graders chosen to participate in the writing project were reading below grade level, as shown in Figure 2. Thirteen students were reading on a mid–first-grade level, two students were reading on an early–first-grade level, and one student was reading on a kindergarten level. Student reading levels were reassessed midyear and again in the spring. By May 2009, every student had shown an increase of at least one reading level, and only two students were reading below grade level. The majority of the students participating in the program (n = 11) demonstrated an increase of 3–5 reading levels (see Figure 3).

**Professional Development**

As the work with students progressed throughout the year, the three teaching partners submitted a proposal to the state reading conference and were accepted as presenters. This was followed by a presentation at a state technology conference. The team of teachers

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**Figure 1**

Grade 2 Reading Benchmark Assessments: Number of Students At or Above Expectation
presented again at the Professional Development Schools Conference at the university as the year concluded. In addition, the students’ work was entered in a county media contest and won first place in its category. All of these professional development activities have served to increase teacher skills and have added to the positive profile of the school.

To be successful, technology integration programs must provide training, exist on site, and supply support that is immediate to teacher needs (Ertmer, 2005). This project, developed by a teacher and implemented by a team of teachers, provided a means for immediate technology training and on-site support. Simultaneously, teachers developed an interdependence that grew as the year evolved. When learning and development occur within the classroom, teachers become invested and provide leadership to one another in the process (Huffman, 2000).
Collaboration

The opportunities for collaboration with this project were numerous. In the planning stage, the special education and Title I teachers, principal, and technology coach brainstormed about possibilities. The technology coach provided support by establishing the wiki and coaching teachers on how to use Web applications such as Blabberize, Photo Story, Pixie 2, and Google Earth. Contact with teachers in South Africa enabled an international collaboration to occur.

As a professional development school with the local university, elementary teacher candidates in a language arts methods course were able to participate as collaborators in writing. In statewide and local presentations, teachers shared their work and discussed the way they learned as they worked their way through the various applications, developing teamwork and supporting one another through each month’s activities.

These opportunities for constructing meaning, developing a vision for the program as it evolved throughout the year, and sharing their struggles and insights sustained collaboration (Strahan, 2003). As they worked together, teachers began to realize that flexibility was an important value. There were some technical obstacles and miscommunications, but these were accepted as part of the learning process.

Parent and Community Involvement

In addition, parents quickly became intrigued by their children’s sudden interest in school. At some of the parent events, parents learned how to access the wiki site and read some of the students’ work. One parent even videotaped his gratitude to the teachers for getting his son excited about coming to school! This student had been receiving Title I assistance, but because of the overwhelming progress he had made that year he no longer required it.

The majority of the parents who responded to the survey agreed that they saw an increase in their child’s enthusiasm for reading and writing, as well as in their ability in literacy activities. The students reported on a survey that their favorite activity was communicating with e-pals, and they unanimously chose to participate again.

Take ACTION!

1. Get approval from the school administration to implement the project, because it will require adapting the existing curriculum. You may choose to make the project a part of your language arts block, or designate a time in the daily or weekly schedule.

2. Develop a collaborative team with the technology teacher, classroom teachers, media specialist, and parent volunteers.

3. Solicit support from the PTA for planning celebrations for various milestones, funding for food and books if needed, and for volunteers.

4. Solicit parental consent from participating students. Construct a form that indicates permission to use children’s writing and speech as well as artwork, photos, and first names or pseudonyms.

5. Create a wiki. This could be supported by your school system or one of the many sites that offer free wikis for teachers, such as www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers.

6. Select students. This project can be used as an intervention/enrichment or as a class project. Selection may be based on students’ assessment data. Determine the measurement tool you will use for pre- and postassessment.

7. Acquire pen pals through networking with those in your school system, nearby higher education institutions, or one of the many websites that encourage international collaboration between classrooms, such as www.studentsoftheworld.info/menu_pres.html.

8. Consider these points: Be aware of time differences that accompany international communications. Postings must be made promptly to ensure successful transmission. Plan to meet frequently with team members to discuss potential changes and directions. Be sure to try out each web application before using with students. Expect to rely heavily on your technology support person. This project creates excitement in students and their parents—be ready to capitalize on these experiences!
This project had everything one could hope for: a dedicated team of teachers that included a highly adept technology coach, a supportive principal, a league of volunteers from the community, a professional development school network, and the technology—video recorders, computers, wikis—to make it possible. Although the students appear to be the main benefactors of this program, this collaboration also strengthened the knowledge and expertise of every individual involved, as a learning community was created around common literacy and technology goals.

The technology applications used by these students will change over time. However, students gained new skills in understanding images, sound, and multimedia. In fact, their teachers testify that they quickly became more adept than their instructors. These students, who are somewhat less receptive to printed texts, responded quickly to sounds and images, and teachers were able to reach them by appealing to their strengths and interests (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). Technology alone is not the answer, but the purposeful integration of technology in literacy instruction is an innovation whose time has come!

References
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- "A Wiki for Classroom Writing" by Brian Morgan and Richard D. Smith, The Reading Teacher, September 2008