Collaborative Literacy: Blogs and Internet Projects

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Popular technologies offer new and exciting ways to capitalize on the strengths of authentic writing, the power of the writing process, and the engagement of collaborative writing. In this column, we showcase students using some of these new technologies. The first vignette focuses on using blogs in the classroom. Blogs are websites that allow individuals to create personal webpages of text, pictures, graphics, videos, and other multimedia with the same ease as creating a word processing document. Unlike traditional websites, however, they provide a space where people can post comments and engage in online conversations. The second vignette illustrates the power of collaborative writing using Internet projects.

Classroom Blogging (by Erica Boling)

Using laptop computers, Julia Siporin’s third-grade students eagerly write blog responses to their buddy, Jefferson Bear. Jefferson, a light brown teddy bear who is the host of Ms. Siporin’s class blog, regularly writes to students and asks them to share their thoughts and opinions about various class topics. In this week’s blog, Jefferson informs students that he is very concerned about all of his endangered wildlife friends. “What’s being done to help my endangered animal friends? You’ve got to do something. Please! They need your help.” Students prepare their responses by conducting online research using websites that are provided by their teacher. One child responds,

Hi Jefferson there are 7 laws that protect endangered animals...there are also these acts that protect them the Bald and Golden Eagle act Migratory Bird Treaty Act Lacey act Marine Mammal Protection Act Airborne Hunting Act And more! Dawn: ).

On another day, Jefferson asks students to share their experiences and suggestions for how individuals might respond when being teased. Sara (all student names are pseudonyms) advises, “You should ask the girl to please stop in a nice way like this: I would really like it if you would please stop taking my pencils, calling me names, and talking when I need to work.”

In another classroom, Betty Collum is looking for innovative ways to motivate and engage her fourth-grade readers. She decides to create a class blog so that students can participate in online literature discussions. Working in groups, students read short pieces of text following a literature-circle format. Each student then selects and writes about a strike (something that stands out) and a wonder (a question) on their class blog. As they blog about their strikes and wonders, they share their ideas with a group of more advanced readers who live more than 100 miles away. Anna writes this about one story: “A wonder I have is if they locked her in a kitchen how come there isn’t an oven, flour, eggs, sugar, and the other ingredients?” Another student replies, “To Anna: I wonder why lock her in a kitchen and not a doungan. Because she could escape from a kitchen.”

Ms. Collum notices how blogging helps her once reticent readers and writers to share ideas and literature response, so she decides to expand her use of blogs the following year when teaching creative writing to fifth graders. Once again, her students select and read novels following the literature-circle model, but
this year they respond by creating poems. Students revise and edit their poems using Google Docs (www.google.com/google-ds/intl/en/tour1.html)—an online collaborative writing site. The students also audiotape the reading of their finished poems. The poetry text and audio files are sent to Kevin Hodgson, a sixth-grade writing teacher, who posts the recordings on his Youth Radio blog (youthradio.wordpress.com).

Mr. Hodgson created Youth Radio so that "young writers and voices can connect with news stories about their communities, their schools, and their interests via ‘audio casting’ (and podcasting).” In one of his class activities, Mr. Hodgson asks a student to photograph a beautiful snowy day in Massachusetts. Other students prepare and record audio commentary to accompany the picture on the Youth Radio blog.

After sharing their photograph and commentary on the Youth Radio site, Mr. Hodgson’s class begins blogging with students in the Philippines, describing what it is like to live in a snowy climate. Angel writes back, “Even if we don’t have snow here, it’s like I’m already experiencing after hearing the story. Thank you very much for making me experience what it’s like to experience snow.” As both classes share audio recordings, images, and written blog responses, they engage in authentic literacy activities and begin to learn about one another and their respective countries.

When teachers act as moderators and create blogs such as The Adventures of Jefferson Bear and Youth Radio, they provide students with opportunities to connect safely with real audiences while learning about different communities and cultures. This, in turn, can result in increased motivation and literacy engagement as students read, write, create, and produce for meaningful and authentic purposes.

Collaborative Internet Projects (by Jill Castek, Lisa Zawilinski, Karen Barton, and Theresa Nierlich)

Preparing for our month-long collaborative Internet project sparked a familiar anxiety: Would the technology work? Could we teach this way? We navigated these concerns by generating ways to address each of the obstacles. In the process, we learned valuable lessons in collaboration and problem solving.
Internet projects unite classrooms in exploring common topics (Leu, 2001). Our partnership included a fifth-grade class in Connecticut, a fourth- and fifth-grade combination class in California, and two online reading comprehension researchers (one in each of these respective locations). We housed our project on a “wiki” website—a type of site that makes it easy to share resources, write collaboratively, and dialogue about the process. Students in both classes worked together to (a) research national parks in the United States, (b) find out about the activities each park offered, and (c) create a wiki page about each park. The final product was a collection of persuasive pieces designed to encourage a fifth-grade exchange student to visit one of the parks.

We designed the project to address our language arts and social studies standards and to give our students experience using the Internet. Instruction centered on teaching students strategies such as identifying problems, locating online resources, critically evaluating information, and sharing ideas, all of which are essential new literacies for using the Internet for literacy learning (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Along with our students, we created new definitions of reading and writing that transformed our conventional notions of school-based literacy into events that were enjoyable, real world, and social.

“The wikis took a lot of patience and we needed to make a LOT of revisions. We sometimes argued about what to put on our site but overall, it was pretty fun,” explained Jason and Abigail, fifth graders in Mrs. Barton’s class. “We spent a lot of time sharing ideas on our wikis instead of doing regular work. :-)”

Writing for an audience of their peers motivated both classes to extensively revise and edit. In contrast to pencil-and-paper writing activities, students enthusiastically reworked their ideas to help their virtual partners grasp the ideas they wanted to communicate.

Our project invited collaboration within the classroom as well as between classrooms. Throughout the project, students were asked by their peers to demonstrate strategies for accomplishing new tasks, oftentimes going above and beyond what the assignment required. These strategies spread contagiously throughout the classroom. One of our struggling readers, experienced in using the Internet, often initiated the flow of information. Being an in-demand expert empowered this learner, increasing his literacy engagement and proficiency. “Neal, can you show us how to insert pictures like you did on your wiki?” asked Paige. “Then I’ll show Brianna’s group.”

We came to understand that today’s students possess knowledge about the Internet that we, as teachers, have not yet acquired. Inviting our students to play the role of “expert” is not always comfortable because it means we must teach differently. We believe it is worth the risk.

Jennifer and Andre’s comments sum up what many students shared about the experience: “We enjoyed doing the project. It was hard in the beginning, but when we got used to the wiki, it was much easier. I hope I can do this again!” We couldn’t have said it better ourselves.

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References