

Chapter 3

Using Digital Portfolios to Enhance Students' Capacity for Communication about Learning

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ABSTRACT

There is a clear consensus that students need to be proficient in the use of digital technologies to help them become knowledgeable participants in an era of global information sharing (International Reading Association, 2009). Acknowledging this, the current study was situated in the belief that writers, when engaged in online composition and the creation of digital portfolios, engage in processes that differ from traditional pencil-paper types of writing. A qualitative approach was utilized to examine student writing samples and reflections over a two-year timeframe as the students transitioned from traditional writing portfolios to those created and maintained digitally on a wiki. The results demonstrated that digital portfolios provide a platform for students to communicate, express their ideas, share their understandings, and collaboratively construct meaning with an authentic audience. Correspondingly, it also demonstrates the necessity of adjusting teaching practices to accommodate for conditions that arise from the unique opportunities presented by the digital environment.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century classroom, technology-infused texts are primary within the practices of today's writers as they engage with ever-emerging tools to write in communicative, collaborative, and

exploratory ways (Taylor, 2012). Students live in a world that is focused upon social interaction and new digital tools for communication have emerged, "changing ways of producing, distributing, exchanging and receiving texts" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 16). Authorship now reaches wider domains and increases the potential for partnership and creativity as students have the opportunity to write for a variety of purposes and

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interact with an authentic audience (Merchant, 2005). In the world of instant information, planning, revision, and editing are often replaced with a quick draft and an even quicker push of the publish button. Writers have the capacity to post comments and publish instantly for an entire virtual world to read. In essence, the tools of writing have changed. The audience has widened. The result is a new generation of writers who have redefined what it means to be literate (Hansen & Kissel, 2010).

It is within this context that we acknowledge the need to know more about how young students use technology as writers; to understand how writing is a tool they use to communicate and collaborate. We must also know practical ways teachers can bring technology into their classrooms so students have opportunities to engage in communicative and collaborative acts as writers. This chapter seeks to address this need as we examine how fourth grade students used technology in their classrooms as a mode of communication and collaboration while moving from paper-based portfolios to digital portfolios, thus allowing a third-space for peers to digitally communicate with one another about their learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory (Bakhtin, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) addresses the learner as an individual as well as part of a context of learning and interaction with others. Risko et al. (2008) describe sociocultural theory as “not simply what happens in the brain of an individual but what happens to the individual in relation to a social context and the multiple forms of interactions with others” (p. 253). Within this perspective, individual meaning (knowledge) is developed within socially-situated contexts through semiotic mechanisms, including language, writing, and other symbol systems (Vygotsky, 1978).

While sociocultural theorists (see Vygotsky, 1978, Bakhtin, 1981) acknowledge the various mechanisms present within social interactions, language is viewed as a primary tool for communication and representation, and, as a result, learning. It enables thought processes, but also serves the dual purpose of facilitating social contact and mediating human behavior (Vygotsky, 1978). For Bakhtin (1981), language represented the mediator within discourse that was culturally and contextually influenced. He theorized, “The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). He articulated the concept of dialogism to describe individuals’ motives for the content of their interactions within specific contexts (Bakhtin, 1981). This was exemplified through dialogue affected by the speaker’s recognition of the respondent’s meaning as well as socially-constructed conventions, such as turn-taking.

Considering the premise that interaction and communication facilitate the development of “ideas, language, values, and dispositions” (Vasquez, 2006, p. 36), meaning is therefore negotiated through social interactions and is reliant on social constructs. Within a classroom, the social nature of learning is exhibited within literacy practices involving co-constructed meaning through shared ideas and social identities of the teacher and the students. Construction of thinking and knowing through social interaction demonstrates the value of shared understanding through collaboration with others. Interactions allow participants to develop and grow as “each participant makes significant contributions to the emergent understanding of all members” (Palincsar, Brown, & Campione, 1993, p. 43). Social construction of meaning in this format compliments Vygotsky’s (1978) belief that the groups are central in helping learners construct knowledge.

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