

Chapter 10

Teaching Writing in the “Techno–Zone”: Exploring New Literacies in a First–Grade Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992), this study is designed to respond to the call to investigate the impact of incorporating new digital media on young students’ engagement and performance in academic writing (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). In doing so, the authors address two central and related questions. First, what is the impact of digital storytelling on primary grade students’ motivation for writing and their writing skills and abilities within a process approach to writing? Second, in what ways do young children develop their identities as authors through digital storytelling? Data analysis reveals three themes that provide evidence of the power of digital storytelling to motivate and engage students in generating personal narratives and developing their writing and fluency skills within the five stages of the writing process. Implications for engaging in research over technology-integrated pedagogy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

One day, a first grade teacher was out sick, and we had to split her students, so I had some extra first grade students in my class. One of my students—Carla—said to a student from the other class, “Our classroom is a techno-zone. We use

lots of technology to learn new things. I’ll show you how to practice your words on the iPod.”

As the quote above illustrates, Leslie Foley’s first-grade class exemplified the shared responsibility for learning typically inherent in teaching literacy through digital media (Hobbs, 2010). Undeni-

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ably, digital reading and writing are affecting not only how K-12 students think about literacy, but also how teachers teach and how educators and researchers define and investigate literacy. Such New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), particularly those of participatory media or those digital media that facilitate creating other new media (Guzzetti, Elliott & Welsch, 2010), have deepened notions of what constitutes literate practice with students like the young children in Leslie’s classroom. While state and national standards across the United States have articulated standards for technology, to date little to no accountability has been put in place to ensure the successful application of such standards. This is due in part to the fact that research on the application of New Literacies in classrooms is still emerging.

NEW LITERACIES

The theories and practices of the New Literacies have been the focus of numerous studies, policy reports, and books in recent years (e.g., Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Street, 1995). Researchers have examined multiple forms and applications of New Literacies shaped by broad socio-cultural contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Given the proliferation of networked technologies, current pedagogical efforts have increasingly focused on the New Literacies derived from digital media. Lankshear and Knobel (2011) defined digital literacies as “complex performances of knowledge assembly, evaluating information content, searching the Internet and navigating hypertext—which comprise epistemic as well as more ‘operational’ elements” (p. 23).

The digital emphasis in New Literacies has led to literate practices that are participatory, collaborative, and distributed to broad and fluctuating audiences. Much of the discourse surrounding New Literacies has concerned the “ideals of

social learning within formal learning contexts” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. xii). Researchers have asserted that writing with participatory digital media provides real-world experiences by addressing a particular audience in a specific context to accomplish a stated goal, like writing for peers (Hobbs, 2010).

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Digital storytelling is the art of combining narrative with images, sound, and video to create a short story (Robin, 2006) and is based on the premise that everyone has a story to tell (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2012). Digital stories are more than just simple slideshows of photos set to music. They interweave various media to support the art of telling a tale (Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011). Most digital stories focus on a specific topic and contain a particular point of view.

The digital storytelling process incorporates writing process theory (Calkins, 1985; Elbow, 1973; Murray, 1984) and involves the five steps of the writing process - prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Emig (1971) noted that these steps were recursive in nature since writers typically loop back and forth among these stages as they rework their written thoughts.

When creating digital stories in a classroom, students plan, write, revise, and publish their writing. Students exchange ideas, knowledge, and establish a purpose for their story. Individuals then compose a digital story by traditional methods - either by using pencil and paper or the word-processing functions of a computer. This composition later becomes the digitalized voice-over narration using a software program like Movie Maker (http://www.soft82.com/download/Windows/Windows_Movie_Maker) for PC computers or iMovie (<http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/>) for Mac computers. Students select graphics or photographs from their personal

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