

Widening the Audience: Students Reading and Writing Online

After seven years teaching CyberEnglish to ninth graders at Sheboygan Falls High School in Sheboygan Falls, Wis., Dawn Hogue keeps expecting the novelty of the class to wear off for students, who typically spend many hours outside of class online.

Yet, she says, at the start of each new school year, “I still see this excitement: ‘Oh, computers in English class, and we get to make our own web pages!’”

All ninth graders at Sheboygan take CyberEnglish, where every desk in the classroom has a computer; every student makes a web page; and homework is published online. Hogue says this extended audience motivates students to be better writers, “because they don’t want to look dumb” to friends, family, and anyone else who might see it; as a result, students are “personally invested” in their work, rather than writing only for a teacher.

Of course, just because a computer and the Internet are involved doesn’t automatically make a student a better writer.

“We’re still dealing with ninth-graders struggling with, ‘how do I say this, how do I phrase this,’” says Hogue, pointing out that creating copy on a computer “does not magically make you a college-level writer.” But, she says, “I think what it does is it changes your perception of yourself as a writer.

“I have far fewer students who say things like, ‘I can’t write’—I don’t hear that anymore, ever. I have far fewer students who just refuse to do [the assignments], which I used to have a lot.”

Hogue is one of many teachers incorporating 21st century literacies in classrooms across the United States. These teachers make use of the Internet and collaborative technologies in a variety of ways, including fostering online classroom discussions, creating student wikis and blogs, directing students in multimedia projects, and training students to be skeptical consumers of information.

Widening the Audience with Blogs

Last year, Melissa Pomerantz’s sophomore students at Parkway North High School in St. Louis created a documentary about climate change. As part of the project, students blogged about their research; not only could



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other students read about their ongoing work, but so could adults in the community who were invited to help with the project, and who were asked to comment on students’ blogs. Pomerantz also published the class blog on Edublog, and before long, started getting hits from as far away as Australia and New Zealand.

“It was really cool to see how our little work in our classroom became larger through [being] online,” says

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“This Is All about Story”

Students also learned about writing fundamentals through the process of editing their film, says Pomerantz.

“The discussions you have with writing are the same discussions you have with film: what goes together, what order should this be presented in, what will be the most powerful argument, and students were using all the language I would love for them to use with writing,” says Pomerantz.

Another benefit: the project showed students how to work together and do effective online research.

“I’ve never had kids excited about research before,” Pomerantz says. “The energy in my classroom was absolutely crazy. Part of it was the technology, but I think a lot of it was because there was a team goal—you needed each person to do their work, because it was such an immense project that you couldn’t do it alone.”

Gretchen Lee, a seventh-grade teacher in Morgan Hill, California, also uses video with her students at Oakwood School.

One project Lee uses at the beginning of the year is a “getting to know you” unit, where she has students bring in pictures of family and friends; these pictures are then fed—along with student music choices—into a program called Animoto (Lee has a free educator account), which produces professional-appearing music videos. As the students watched each others’ videos, Lee told them, “This is all about story. Look at your video and write an essay right now about what story you are telling—what are your themes, what are your emphases.”

“Not only did students learn how to design their video, but they also wrote about it,” says Lee. “They learned from writing about 21st century literacies using 18th century literacy—that to me was a sort of wonderful marriage.”

For another video project, Lee has her students use handheld cameras to make movies featuring vocabulary words. Students write a storyboard and script, do all the filming, and put together a five-minute video that is expected to have a beginning, middle, and end. These videos then are published to the classroom wiki.

“The students weren’t sure anybody would be interested in Greek and Latin roots and prefixes, and to find out that a number of schools were using their wiki was very exciting for them,” says Lee.

Sharing Information Online

Third-, fourth- and fifth-graders at Meriwether Lewis Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, use Google Documents to create work online, says principal Tim Lauer. Each student has a Google account, which allows them to log in and use Google’s word-processing program; the work then



Students in Melissa Pomerantz’s class rehearse interview techniques for a documentary film they are creating as part of a class research project. Students learn how to interview, edit, storyboard, and work collaboratively to create a film that they hope will effect change in their world.

Shown here, from left to right, are Emilie Schneider, Alex Pesek, Garrett Strause, and Claire Krusie.

can be easily shared with teachers. Students can see edits and changes through saved drafts; teachers can insert comments; and students can work at home as well.

All teachers at Meriwether also update the school’s blog on a weekly basis, says Lauer. Teachers are given 20 minutes to do this, and their text is captured for the school’s paper newsletter, so parents who don’t see the site online can still receive news.

Elementary students at Meriwether do research online, but only from pre-selected, vetted sites, which are listed on the class blog, says Lauer. With elementary students, he notes, “you’re not going to start with Google.”

Nonetheless, Lauer (who teaches technology one day a week) and other teachers work with young children to be smart web consumers.

“If we’re talking about nutrition and wellness, we look at websites for cereal companies. We look at what’s their point here, what are they trying to do, why does Tony the Tiger have a website?”

21st Century Challenges

Privacy and online security are issues teachers with older students face as well. For example, says Lee, as a middle-school teacher, she takes care to never put any work with full names on it online. “I don’t want anyone to trace where students go to school.”

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Or, with email, what the students receive is filtered by the teacher first. Lee says each student in her class is given an email address through the school's Google Educator account, but "I sign them up so all the email goes through me."

Teachers don't always use new technologies to their full potential—sometimes due to lack of training, says Bud Hunt, an instructional technologist and former language arts teacher in Longmont, Colo., who helps teachers integrate technology into their classrooms. He says teachers need time to learn new equipment and new software, and that administrators need to keep this in mind when delivering shiny new tools.

"We think a lot about spending money to buy hardware and software—and we don't ever think about providing money so teachers have time to learn the hardware and software, to literally play with it and explore it," says Hunt.

It can take up to a year of periodic training to help teachers learn how to use "smart classroom" tools like laptops, interactive whiteboards, and document cameras in a meaningful way, says Hunt.

Sometimes teachers are resistant to 21st century technologies because they recognize that using them changes the traditional role of the teacher.

"It used to be the teacher was the expert in the classroom," says Hunt. Now, with computers in the classroom—and the wealth of information they provide—this is no longer the case, which for a teacher can be "scary or liberating."

For some teachers, says Lee, the idea that they may not be the experts—that in some areas, the students might know more than they do—"holds a lot of teachers back." Because they are not as familiar with Web 2.0 tools as their students, they are reluctant to use them.

Web Tools to Consider

Here are a few recommendations for web-based tools you may find useful in your classroom:

Wordle This website (at www.wordle.net) allows users to create word clouds. Students can enter descriptive words about themselves or a topic, and can choose fonts and background colors to make the image more personal.

Jing This free video-capture program can be used to record instructions to students. These mini-movies can be posted on the teacher's resource list, to remind students how to do a particular task or element of a project.

Google applications Google offers useful tools such as Google Documents (which allows for sharing of files and easy text-editing), Google Maps (an online map tool), and Google Reader (an RSS reader which lets you subscribe to news, blogs, and other websites—useful for research).

Nicenet This free, bare-bones program, similar to Moodle or Blackboard, lets schools create a private network. Teacher Melissa Pomerantz cautions that its interface is ugly, but says it allows for a variety of functions, such as threaded discussions that students can continue from home.

NCTE Inbox Blog Read the June-September archives for introductions to a variety of tech tools, at <http://ncteinbox.blogspot.com>

Sources: Gretchen Lee, Melissa Pomerantz, Dawn Hogue

Lee points out that today, 20 years after she started teaching, she finds the profession is no longer about standing up in front of the class and imparting all the answers. Rather, she says, teaching is more about “making an array of information available” and then teaching critical thinking skills so students can use the information well.

One way to counter teacher hesitancy is for them to become familiar with blogs, Facebook, and other web tools. “You have to use it first,” says Hogue. “You can’t teach it if you don’t use it.”

When teachers take the leap, they are likely to find other benefits as well.

Hunt says blogging for the past three-and-a-half-years has helped him develop professionally.

“I’ve probably learned more about teaching and learning as a result of being engaged in professional discussions online than I’ve learned in any meeting or class or directive from an administrator,” says Hunt.

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Hogue finds teaching using cybertools helps her stay more organized. She publishes lessons, calendars, and other resources online for her students, which “gives us all a common place to start, so I think of it as publishing my file cabinet, and it’s all there for you, and you know where I’m going.” She believes this helps her class feel like “we’re all working together, instead of just the teacher having the key.”

“Publishing on the web changes you as a teacher,” says Hogue. “I could never go back to how I did it before.”

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For extended interviews, read “More Thoughts on 21st Century Literacies” on the November 2008 *Council Chronicle* web page at <http://www.ncte.org/magazine>