

FIRST PERSON

“That’s online writing, not boring school writing”: Writing with blogs and the Talkback Project

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By combining writing with online technology, teachers can provide opportunities for students and future educators to develop their digital fluency while also strengthening their traditional literacy skills.

Cassandra (pseudonym) was a student in my eighth-grade language arts class during the fall of 2004. She showed little interest in our classroom writing activities and assignments. During a parent-teacher conference to discuss my concerns about her lack of involvement, I was shocked to hear her parents say, “But she writes all the time! She’s on the computer writing essays and poems for hours each night.” Cassandra was quick to reply, “That’s online writing, not boring school writing. We all do it on Xanga.” “We all?” I asked, wondering just how big this world of Xanga could possibly be. Cassandra replied, “You know, everybody! Teenagers...any teenager in the world with a computer.”

I was dumbfounded that Cassandra, a student reluctant to write a paragraph in her journal each day in my classroom, was writing pages and pages of creative words, unassigned poetry and prose, each night on her blog. In one way, it was a

stab in the heart for me as a writing teacher. I worked hard to give my students thought-provoking prompts from which to write. Although I was excited that she, and apparently every other teenager in the world with a computer, was passionate about writing, I took the news personally. Yet the technology side of me was intrigued by this revelation. What was it about posting personal writing on an online blog that was so different from the writing in my classroom?

Blog integration in the Talkback Project

While attending a 2004 U.S. conference in Indianapolis, Indiana, I had the opportunity to hear about a variety of writing collaborations involving university and middle school students. In one particular project, preservice teachers at Indiana University were writing two-way journals collaboratively with middle school students. Both sets of students were strengthening their literacy skills on different levels: The preservice teachers were learning the intricacies of interpreting and

responding to student work while the middle school students were developing their comprehension and written responses with a clearly defined audience. This successful project flourished as a genuine respect developed between the generations through the pages of the journals.

A university professor and I met immediately following the presentation and brainstormed on how we could build upon the success of the project and integrate the technology that was available to us through our work with our local writing project site, a part of the National Writing Project (NWP). It was at this moment that I thought of my student, Cassandra, and the writing she did on her online blog. Could we capture the success of this journal collaboration and translate it into the world of technology?

Leu and Kinzer (2000), in their research of technologies and literacy, found that "the convergence of literacy instruction with Internet technologies is fundamentally reshaping the nature of literacy instruction as teachers seek to prepare children for the futures they deserve" (p. 111). Determined to seek this type of opportunity for my students, I began researching the types of literacy and technology collaborations taking place in secondary schools. Kajder (2004) studied a language arts teacher who successfully integrated blogs into her classroom. She noted that "good teaching requires effective planning, especially with the introduction of a new online writing technology" (p. 33). Kajder also noted that the students appeared "hungry for writing on their classroom blog" (p. 34). I was thrilled with the possibility of students being "hungry" for writing.

There are many successful weblog projects used in K-12 schools, such as the fourth-grade blog by students in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, which won the International Reading Association's Miss Rumphius Award for technology integration (Kreul, 2001). After reading about the success with blogs, the professor and I wondered if we could weave a two-way journal activity between preservice teachers and middle school

students into a blog. Thus, the Talkback Project was born in the spring of 2005.

Because I served as the technology liaison for the local writing project site, I had direct access to the site blog provided to us through the NWP. I created a middle school/university discussion group that we could use exclusively. In order to integrate the technology with the curriculum, we decided to center the blog conversations on the novels middle school students were reading in literature circles.

To begin the project, I signed students up as users on the blog, using my school e-mail to avoid forgotten usernames or passwords, and assigned each student a pseudonym to use while signing their blog entries. My students posted their journal entries on the Talkback Project blog during class time on one of the 25 computers I had available for student use. The preservice teachers read the novels along with the students and also responded on the blog weekly.

The first semester succeeded without a hitch as far as the technological aspects went. We ran into a few roadblocks, however, on our first attempt at literacy and technology integration. I quickly learned the importance of clarifying expectations for both students and preservice teachers. My preservice students tended to use the blog space as a live Internet chat space and to post things that were not at all related to the discussion. The middle school students also had problems accepting the preservice teachers as collaborators on the project because they felt as though they were being "talked down to" at times. In many cases, the preservice teachers were doing more with their "teacher hats" on instead of using their collaborative voices when responding to the students.

The preservice teachers completed the requirements we had set for them, yet the connections we had hoped they would make with the middle school students were not made. The preservice teachers became frustrated when the middle school students did not read the novel as

quickly as they did. They also expressed aggravation that the middle school students were not interpreting the novels as they were and had difficulty connecting with the students when posting just once a week. Finally, both groups felt that the end of the project was anticlimactic. There was not an end product to ensure closure took place.

During the fall of 2005, we revamped the criteria and activities by keeping in mind the criticism we had received from the previous participants. We decided to focus more on blog collaboration and conversations. Although the novels were an important common ground from which to start, they were not the only topics of conversation. The preservice teachers worked hard to develop questions that allowed middle school students to make text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-self connections. We scheduled more face-to-face visits between the participants, believing that both groups would be more vested in the projects when they understood that "real people," not a computer, were depending on them. Finally, we integrated more technology with the project by designing a collaborative, culminating activity involving student-made videos on a book they had read. The professor and I were excited about the development and growth in the Talkback Project.

The Talkback Project, however, hit a huge roadblock during the fall of 2005. The classroom of computers I had depended on during the previous year had been removed in anticipation of the arrival of a wireless computer cart with 30 laptops, which was due to arrive in October. I was forced to make the Talkback Project adapt to the use of five classroom computers, using three class periods a week to cycle students through the computers and post their blog entries. This was a massive drain on time resources in my classroom, yet I felt the need to remain committed to the project.

The students involved with the Talkback Project far exceeded our expectations with their dedication to work collaboratively. Many insightful discussions and text connections grew from

the blog. The middle school students appreciated the preservice teacher's thoroughness and the time that they were spending to respond to their questions and reflections about the texts. Word quickly spread throughout the building about our success with the Talkback Project blog. The good news spread as far as Iraq, where a soldier wrote to ask if he could participate in the book discussion with his son's literature circle group. I quickly mailed off a package of the young adult novels we would be reading, and soon the parent was responding to the blog discussion and young adult novels.

"It's like we've gone back to using leeches"

As the success of our project began to escalate, so did the attention given to our activities. During November of 2005, I was asked by the district and building administration to cease using the Talkback Project blog. An administrator, while reading through the blog postings, noticed one instance where a student mentioned a neighborhood in which he lived. Even though we used codenames, the administrator felt that the student could become a victim of an online predator and decided that the project be cancelled. Although we had obtained permission for each student's participation in the project from his or her parents or guardians, the district was concerned about an outsider's possible access to the blog. Rather than fight the battle we knew we should fight, the professor and I decided to take the Talkback Project back to its original roots—a two-way journal on paper.

Each Monday, my students would respond to their novels through the notebooks. I would deliver the notebooks to the professor each Tuesday, which he then delivered to his preservice teachers on Thursday. This cycle of written communication between groups continued for the remainder of the project, much to the dismay of both groups. As one middle school student so eloquently expressed, "It's like we've gone back to

using leeches instead of nuclear medicine.” Both groups were frustrated that the success of the blog had been interrupted by what they termed as a “paranoid Big Brother.”

I had to help students understand the legal and educational issues of online information while also motivating them to continue with the Talkback Project through the culminating assignments. Because of the connection made between the preservice and middle school students, both groups felt a sense of responsibility in completing the project without the use of the blog. Both groups continued to express frustration that their blog could no longer be used and even offered to hold a protest to show their displeasure. Instead, I suggested that the students write letters to explain why they felt that the Talkback Project blog was important to their learning and why they should be able to continue using the blog to talk with others about their connections with books.

“You’ve taken away my voice”

The power of the written word was evident in the reaction of all of the parties involved. Because of the letters written by the students, the administrators were able to see how the collaboration on the Talkback Project blog had become an important part of my students’ lives. One student wrote, “By taking away our access to the Talkback Project blog, you have taken away my voice.” Our parent participant, the soldier serving in Iraq, also wrote a letter of support. In it, he shared his appreciation for the school’s concern about the students involved in the project. Yet, he noted,

Rather than ending the project altogether, I believe the project could have been used as a learning experience for everyone involved. District officials, or anyone else, who felt a concern about the information being posted in the project could have asked for the information to be removed rather than shutting down the access to everyone.

He went on to say, “Reading the novels and sharing my thoughts with the young men and women on

the Talkback Project blog was the highlight of my day. I was sad to see it go away.” The passionate testimonials from the Talkback Project participants prompted officials to look into the possibility of hosting a blog discussion on our existing school network, striking a balance between their ability to control access and content and the students’ ability to share their thoughts about the novels with preservice teachers and parents who were eager to share a common ground with adolescents.

The blog must go on

Many researchers expect the use of blogs in the classrooms to continue to grow at an extraordinary pace (Oravec, 2002). Huffaker and Calvert (2005), in their research of teenagers and blog use, believed that blogs should be further explored because of their importance to “technologists, teachers, parents, and researchers who are interested in computer-mediated communication, online communities, children and technology, and adolescent development.” As we begin preparing for the next school year, I will continue to push for the implementation of a blog discussion tool on our existing school network. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has demanded the attention of the U.S. educational and literacy community with its focus on assessments and the accountability for school performance. With the increasing pressure of these challenges, educators and school districts must continue to invest substantially more time in preparing students for these assessments while also preparing students for a future of digital fluency. School districts must remain on the cutting edge of education by offering ways for teachers to provide instructional strategies through avenues of technology, while also preparing for the safety and legal concerns that this exchange of information brings. Because NCLB states that every student should be technologically literate by the eighth grade, schools must focus their efforts on bridging the gap between the traditional definition of literacy and technologies such as the Talkback Project blog.

The Talkback Project should serve as an example of how schools can shrink the technology gap and better prepare students to become citizens of a global society. As Cassandra's words so eloquently put in perspective, "any teenager in the world with a computer" will continue to become a part of the global society, with or without the guidance of schools and teachers, by using blogs to share writing with the world. Through the Talkback Project, I know that we have provided opportunities for students and future educators to develop their digital fluency while also strengthening their traditional literacy skills.

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