Five Ways to Grow as a Digital Writing Teacher

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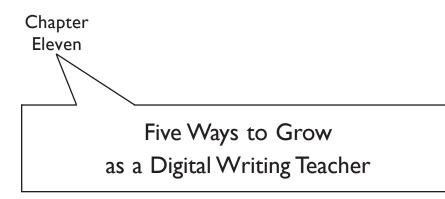Series Number: PPBP020-X029-2008

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Abstract

In this final chapter from the book, *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and other Digital Tools*, the authors suggest five practical strategies for educators to improve their abilities to teach writing with digital tools. The suggestions are also supported by numerous online links, articles and resources. Richard Beach, one of the book's authors, has written several books on media literacy and teaches courses on media literacy at the University of Madison full-time and part-time at UCLA. This book is accompanied by a wiki page (http://digitalwriting.pbworks.com/) that provides many useful resources.

Chapter
Eleven

Five Ways to Grow
as a Digital Writing Teacher

Engaging students in digital writing requires learning and growing in some new directions as a teacher. As a busy teacher coping with the daily demands of teaching, learning to use and integrate a whole new set of Web 2.0 digital writing tools can be daunting and difficult. Moreover, traditional professional development workshops on technology integration may not meet a teacher's unique needs or involve hands-on, follow-up support, suggesting the need for supportive professional development that serves to foster implementation, reflection, and change (Vrasidas & Glass, 2007).

In this final chapter, we suggest five ways to grow as a digital writing teacher.

1. Join Online Communities Devoted to Teaching Digital Writing

There is lot of useful information available from the growing number of online communities devoted to teaching digital writing. Teachers can access this information by using RSS feeds to subscribe to relevant blogs, wikis, and podcasts in which educators describe their use of new digital writing tools and how use of these tools influences their students' writing (@ = Educators' blogs, @ = Classroom-school-library-professional development wikis). For example, the previously

mentioned weekly podcast, Teachers Teaching Teachers (http://teachersteachingteachers.org) organized by Paul Allison, involves K–12 teachers sharing their experiences using digital writing tools (@ = online professional development communities). Further information on uses of Web 2.0 technology tools is available on the EdTechTalk network of podcasts (http://www.edtechtalk.com/), including EdTechWeekly, 21st Century Learning, EdTechBrainstorm, EdTechTalk, EdTechTalk K–12, Making Connections, and Women of Web 2.0 (@ = Educator and classroom podcasts).

Teachers can download presentations from technology conferences—for example, the NECC conference (http://center.uoregon.edu/ISTE/NECC2008), the K–12 Online Conference (http://www.k12onlineconference.org), or the Learning 2.0 conference (http://learning2cn.ning.com). They can also join social networks of teachers interested in Web 2.0 technology integration—for example, School 2.0 (http://school20.ning.com) or Classroom 2.0 (http://classroom20.ning.com).

Free professional development resources are also available, including journals—*T.H.E. Journal* (http://www.thejournal.com), *Edutopia* (http://www.edutopia.org), *KAIROS* (http://kairos.technorhetoric.net), and *Computers and Composition Online* (http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline)—and professional organizations—the National Council of Teachers of English (http://www.ncte.org/collections/weblit), the National Writing Project (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource_topic/writing_and_technology), the Apple Learning Exchange (http://edcommunity.apple.com/ali), PBS Teachers (http://www.pbs.org/teachers), Education World (http://www.educationworld.com/a_tech/index.shtml), and 4Teachers (http://www.4teachers.org).

Teams of teachers within a district could enroll in NCTE's CoLEARN Writing Intiative program (http://www.ncte.org/store/learning/116735.htm, $1,200 for 12 teachers for a year). This online in-service program provides teachers with access to full-text articles, sharing of ideas about teaching writing, online discussions with teachers from all over the country, and sessions with composition experts.

2. View and Create Online Teacher Cases

Another way to learn from online communities is to view online cases of teachers describing and reflecting on their teaching that include video clips of students' learning, examples of student work, and teacher reflection (@ = Online teacher cases). Reading cases, as well as creating cases, fosters understanding of teachers' thinking about teaching within specific classroom contexts and how teachers adopt and employ tools within their own unique, specific contexts (Anson, 2002).

The Goldman-Carnegie Quest Program (2006) site (http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/insideteaching/quest/collections.html) includes a "teaching gallery" of K–12 online teaching cases that contain inquiry-based, teacher reflections about teaching English language arts. For example, Pincus (2006) addresses a question about her high school students' drama class, "How can I connect students to the work of Shakespeare by infusing 'main stage' teaching with 'second stage' practices?" by showing examples of her students' drama performances.

Hutchinson (2006) examines how she can draw on her African American elementary students' oral traditions in teaching literacy. These teachers use video clips of their students' drama performance and language use to reflect on how their instruction leads to student engagement in learning. Finally, Steven Krause constructed a case study of his college "Broadcast Composition" course in which he employed audio files, podcasts, and screencasts to engage his students in audio production of their writing (http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/krause1).

Within a school or district, teachers might create and share their own cases consisting simply of written descriptions or reflections of their teaching and/or videos of their teaching. Housing these cases within a specific school or district means that teachers already have a context for a shared understanding of their standards, curriculum, and culture.

3. Create a Personal Learning Network

One of the primary Web 2.0 digital literacies is the ability to network and build relationships online, something that students are continually doing on Facebook. In his 2007 K–12 online conference presentation, Utecht (2007) argues that while accessing online communities can provide a lot of useful information, they may not necessarily provide information relevant to a teacher's need in a "just-in-time" manner. He proposes that teachers create their own "personal learning networks" consisting of a group of teachers who interact with one another to address their needs.

To build this network, he suggests using an RSS reader such as Bloglines or Google Reader to subscribe to specific blogs, particularly their own colleagues' blogs, that address specific needs to which teachers can pose comments. He also suggests creating links to colleagues or support persons using Twitter (http://twitter.com), (@ = Twitter) IMing, or social-networking sites for sharing ideas or posing specific questions to receive immediate answers to questions.

In addition to these tools, teachers can create their social networks for a specific group using open-source software such as Ning (http://www.ning.com) (for an example, see the Education Ning: http://education.ning.com), Elgg (http://

elgg.net/), Drupal (http://drupal.org), Orkut (http://www.orkut.com), People Aggregator (http://www.broadbandmechanics.com), Virtual Learning Commons (http://sourceforge.net/projects/vlc), or iSocial (http://sourceforge.net/projects/socialnetwork) (@ = Social learning sites). In these networks, teachers can include immediate colleagues as well as other invited people whose expertise they value. Then when they try out digital writing tools, they can share successes and challenges with people for their comments and advice.

4. Conduct Teacher Action Research on Teaching Digital Writing

A fourth way to grow as a teacher involves conducting teacher action research projects about specific issues or questions related to teaching digital writing. Teacher action research involves looking systematically at the relationship between teaching and student learning (Glanz, 2003) (@ = Teacher action research). Teachers identify specific issues or questions related to their teaching—for example, whether students can use e-portfolios to reflect in a thoughtful manner about their writing. They then collect data based on observations, interviews, or analysis of students' digital writing.

Such research could serve to demonstrate the value of using digital writing tools in the classroom. For example, Ewa McGrail and Anne Davis were curious about the value of blogging in Anne's fifth-grade class, so they conducted a research project:

> Our classroom blogging research project that spanned a school year examined what happens when fifth graders blog and converse about literacies in class and beyond. A class blog was created by the blogging teacher to engage students in thinking and blogging about their learning and what it meant to them. Then student blogs were launched (http://neccposter2007.googlepages.com/linkstoclassblogsandstudentblogsattheele). Student and teacher reflections and conversations, both verbally and on blogs, were employed as a tool for deeper thinking and as a learning strategy. Students were taught the following attributes of blogging: questioning, thinking, writing, collaborating, reflecting, commenting, linking, and proofreading. To push the learning connections and stretch students to higher levels of thinking, comment starters were used. Examples included: "This made me think about…"; "This post is relevant because…"; "I don't understand…". Throughout, the class blog served as a model for composing thoughtful posts and comments. The current class blog post was shared at each session with the entire class to summarize and celebrate learning.

Dialogue in the classroom was crucial. Understanding aspects of writing in public spaces was emphasized. There was a focused effort on nurturing a community of bloggers within and beyond the classroom.

Our initial analysis began by reviewing student writing samples in a quantitative fashion (Weber, 1990). As we looked at pre- and post-grade-level scores based on counts, averages, and readability indicators by the Flesch-Kincaid formulas, we found that most students improved in grade levels, but these scores did not tell us much about the attributes of writing. Our next step was to conduct a qualitative content analysis (Creswell, 2003) by focusing on the following areas of writing: attitude, content, voice, connections and relationships, thinking, and craft.

From this analysis three larger themes emerged. First, there was a change in attitude. Students were motivated and they looked forward to reading posts and responding to comments. There was an increase in blogger confidence reflected in enthusiasm and a willingness to take risks in thinking and writing on their blogs. They were also anxious to experiment with language and were more focused in their interactions with their readers. Second, student awareness of the audience was evident as the audience became a driving force because the students cared about, related to, and interacted with them to improve their communications. They strived to make their writing interesting, engaging, and clear for their audience. They also sought feedback, support, and ideas. These student bloggers developed strong voices as relationships strengthened. Third, there were changes in the quantity and quality of writing. Sentences became longer. Students attempted to write in a more complex way. They used richer vocabulary and syntax and became more playful with blogging by using figurative language and being creative. They experimented with connected words and phrases and made an effort to explain and illustrate their ideas and thinking. This writing did not always translate into a polished product. However, they were definitely taking steps to richer, meaningful, and engaged writing. This needs to be viewed in a very positive light. If there are no attempts to take risks, there is no room for growth.

By posing questions about the value of blogging and then collecting data to address these questions, Ewa and Anne demonstrate how blogging serves to enhance students' writing ability, something that teachers can use to justify their use of digital writing tools in their classrooms.

As a social studies teacher committed to fostering a social justice, multicultural agenda, Aby (2007) was concerned about the fact that her largely white, middle class students in her fall 2007 government classes at Jefferson High School in Bloomington, Minnesota, needed to address how institutional forces related to

racial differences shaped the political election process. She believed that by having students share their views about how issues of race influenced the political primary elections, they would begin to recognize the importance of the forces of racism operating in society. She also believed that by using a blog, students of different races would feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives than in face-to-face classroom discussions.

She developed a blog (http://2008presidentialrace-meredith.blogspot.com/) for use during a 10-week period that focused on the 2008 presidential primary campaigns. For her blog prompts, she encouraged students to engage in research about the issues addressed in the primaries as well as how the candidates' stances would influence racial and ethnic groups. For example, one of her prompts asked students to reflect on whether and how candidates who are African American such as Senator Obama represent the "Black vote." She also asked students to reflect on which candidates and parties were most likely to attract the Latino vote.

In addition to providing students with background readings on these issues, she also built classroom discussions around the issues addressed in the blog prompts. At the end of the grading period, she asked students to submit their best response and their best original blog post for her evaluation based on criteria of the organization of information, consideration of alternatives, disciplinary content, elaboration of ideas, evidence of research, number of posts, and writing quality.

Given her goal of fostering cooperative group work in diverse settings, she assigned students to small groups according to differences in race and sex. These groups were then responsible for creating a wiki page for their class wiki based on a review of two assigned chapters from the students' government textbook.

As a reflective teacher, Aby (2007) was curious the whether her use of the blog was helping students address issues of racial difference. She therefore conducted a research project to complete her master's program thesis requirement. She interviewed teachers and students about their perceptions of effective multicultural education; asked a colleague to observe a classroom discussion; took field notes about the degree to which her prompts served to address issues of race, her students' reactions to her activities, and their ability to work together in groups; and surveyed her students to determine their perceptions of her activities.
By comparing differences in the discussions across time, she noted improvements in the quality of the classroom discussions, differences she attributes to their blogging, which provided them with "more experiences and opinions and material to draw from. This made it easier for all of them to participate" (p. 24). She noted the following:

> The blog activity radically changed my class. It equalized participation in a way I have never been able to do in class. Quiet students did not have to

> fight to have their voices heard. In fact, my quieter students found more of a voice online. One African American girl, who is struggling academically in class, responded to two or three people every post even though she was only required to respond to one student. However, in class she is very self-conscious about speaking. Another student, an academically successful white girl who is who is terrified of speaking in class, posted lengthy write-ups. She frequently made the decision to post first, which successfully carved out a spot for her in our discussion, and set the tone for the whole class' discussion. (p. 24)

She also found that having to conduct research to complete her blog prompts helped prepare students for the discussions. She noted that:

> They successfully tied in information from other areas of study, resources they had researched independently, and posts that they read from their classmates. This is the best discussion I have ever seen high school students have about race in my eleven years of teaching. It was an academic political science discussion based on research, personal experience and observation…the blog was successful at preparing them for the activity because it used a medium they were already excited about and because it is an authentic medium for campaigns and election. The students made several connections to things they had said in their blog posts or that others had said in their blog posts.

Aby's (2007) student survey data indicated that "the blog and the candidate presentations were the activities that gave them the best understanding of the election." Although most students preferred to make their own selections of peers to work with, half of the students of color indicated that they preferred teacher-assigned groups based on race and sex because it meant that they were more likely to work in more mixed groups.

From conducting her study, Aby (2007) recognized the value of her blogging to enhance her students' collaborative learning and discussions, results she shared with other teachers in her social studies Advanced Placement professional learning community.

5. Create a Teacher E-Portfolio to Reflect on and Document Growth

Finally, as we noted in the last chapter, we recommend that teachers keep a teacher e-portfolio to not only reflect on teaching but also to document development

over time, a process that can be useful for demonstrating one's effectiveness as a teacher for purposes of tenure or administrative evaluations. As noted in the last chapter, this e-portfolio could simply be a blog or wiki. One study of posts from 12 middle school teachers' blogs found that teachers use blog posts to engage in some degree of reflection about their teaching, although there was not much evidence of critical analysis of their teaching (Ray & Hocutt, 2006). It is important that teachers be willing to think critically about teaching in terms of identifying goals for improvement and then monitoring growth in achieving those goals.

Teachers can also access examples of online "course portfolios" to perceive how other teachers reflect on their courses (@ = Teaching portfolios). For example, the Peer Review of Teaching Project (PRTP) (2007), housed at the University of Nebraska, provides teachers with a repository of 240 course portfolios for review by other teachers. This project suggests the value of creating a similar repository in a school or district for sharing of teacher reflections.

Summary and an Invitation

In this chapter, we describe five things teachers can to enhance their own teaching: join online communities, view and create online teacher cases, create a personal learning network, conduct teacher action research, and create a teacher portfolio. All of these activities are designed to keep teachers informed about and reflect on methods for teaching digital writing.

We close with one more invitation to join the community of readers of this book by contributing material to the resource wiki, http:// digitalwriting.pbwiki.com (password: digwriting; please do not delete material). We hope that the ideas presented in this book will serve to enhance students' engagement with writing.