Integrating Technology in the Writing Process

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January 16, 2013

Writing has been an integral part of most human cultures in one form or another since the first pictographs were created. Furthermore, writing methods have evolved over time with technology shaping the process. For example, Gutenberg's invention of movable type in 1454 dramatically revolutionized the writing process. With this invention, books no longer had to be hand written. Written documents became much more widespread, and, eventually, literacy became a much more fundamental skill for all people. The printing press enabled writers to share their thoughts and ideas with a much larger audience.

In the 21st century, we are at another benchmark in technology with the availability of computers. Educators are challenged to utilize technology to further promote students' expression through writing. Recently, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) created a position statement for teaching, learning, and assessing of writing in digital environments to define how educators should embrace the new technologies (CCCC, 2004). The position statement concluded that "...all writing is social; accordingly, response to and evaluation of writing are human activities." In 2007, the CCCC published a related position statement entitled "Principles and Practices in Electronic Portfolios". The position statement stressed that teachers of writing have a responsibility to help students learn to write, using the most effective communication technologies.

Professional development for educators to actively integrate computers into instruction is needed.. In too many of our classrooms, the innovative technology that could transform learning is absent. To prepare future teachers in the Teacher Educator Program at Sul Ross State University to become effective writing teachers merging the "human response" to students' writing with technology, all students in the *Social Studies and English Language Arts Methods Course* (Fall 2012) experimented with an online program to teach writing. These students analyzed the online writing program from both a student's perspective and a teacher's perspective to determine if it would promote greater student engagement and deeper learning in the writing process.

There are many online writing programs on the market, and a number of them were reviewed for use in this course. MYAccess was selected, because of the clean website design, extensive collection of rubric-scored writing prompts spanning 4th grade through college, flexibility for the teacher to add prompts directly aligned with the curriculum, robust assessment reports including reports to parents, and a cumulative student portfolio for English speaking students as well as English Language Learners. MYAccess afforded students the opportunity to collaborate in the peer editing process electronically. It also promoted greater student engagement with students writing more.

At the start of the course, the Sul Ross State University students embraced the belief that all high school graduates must develop writing skills to express themselves in their careers as well as in their personal lives. They recognized that those writing skills must be developed over time through a systematic approach introducing the important steps of the writing process. Their readings included works by Lucy Calkins who has explored

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the writing process through the Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University. The students adopted the goal of writing instruction to foster lifelong writers. They also studied Calkins' four-step approach to students writing about their lives, learning the writing process, writing in authentic ways, and developing their own independence. The students understood that the sometimes daunting task to teach all steps in the writing process- 1)prewriting, 2) drafting, 3) revising, 4) editing, and 5)publishing- was demanding.

The Sul Ross University students discovered that with limited instructional time, the classroom teacher could enlist technology to maximize students' proficiency in writing. From the human response position, Calkins stressed the essential role of the teacher in teaching writing. She introduced "mini-lessons" to provide direct instruction in areas of specific need for students. By using the diagnostic MYAccess reports, the teacher could pinpoint the topics of need for the "mini-lessons". Calkins also maintained that conferencing was the "heart of our teaching" (Calkins, 1994). The online writing program allowed students to compose digitally and independently; while allowing time for teachers to provide human feedback through individual student conferencing. Using the MYAccess program, the Sul Ross students discovered that the online writing program provided support for each step of the writing process; while affording teacher intervention along the entire way. The online program offered a variety of pre-writing activities including graphic organizers such as Venn Diagrams and KWL charts. During the drafting step, students found the diagnostic feature, My Editor, to give precise, clear, and constructive feedback for editing. MYAccess also provided a number of anchor papers reflecting the five domains of the scoring rubric: focus and meaning, content and development, organization, language use and style, and mechanics and

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conventions. The students experimented with a number of cross-curricular writing prompts to understand the program from a student's perspective. They observed that the instant electronic ratings of each draft with analytic feedback provided valuable direction for future revisions. They also liked the Revision Plan Tool that encouraged students to be independent and reflective practitioners. They found the instant feedback from MYAccess program promoted intrinsic motivation for students to keep trying to improve their writing.

The Sul Ross students reflected on MYAccess from a teacher's perspective. The program offers a very robust assessment system where the teacher can monitor individual student's progress as well as the whole class performance. The program provides a variety of assessment reports to help the teacher identify which of the domains should be a focus for the mini-lessons. The reports can combine all students' writing to give a teacher a broad overview of the class.

The MYAccess program was found to support the unique needs of the classroom environment. There are many prompts loaded into the system. However, teachers may create their own prompts, too. For example with the focus on technical text with the Common Core, teachers may enter a technical text and a writing assignment linked to the reading. Those texts could range from primary documents in history to descriptions of scientific studies. The prompts could challenge students to read complex texts and respond to quality text-based questions in their writing, as Sandra Alberti called for in "Making the Shifts" (Alberti, 2012-2013).

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The students also liked the flexibility that the program offered for time management. While students were writing their essays online, the teacher could meet individually with students to provide that important feedback that Lucy Calkins stressed is the heart of teaching.

Sul Ross students concluded the semester by writing to the prompt, "After using MYAccess, describe what you learned about teaching writing with technology". They were enthusiastic about the program and stated its values:

"Overall, I believe MYAccess is an outstanding tool for those who try to improve their writing skills. It guides you to become a better writer." "MYAccess is a very detailed, organized tool for teaching writing." "MYAccess is a great teaching tool for students and will definitely improve their writing." "I enjoyed MYAccess and will use this in my classroom."

The Sul Ross students observed that MYAccess was an effective technology to introduce for the teaching of writing to promote students' writing literacy and screen literacy. The digital environment allowed students to share their work with their teachers and their classmates for peer review. Students using MYAccess could learn from the guidance provided by both the program and their teachers to set their own goals for future learning. The personal portfolio of writing collected on the MYAccess site could provide students with a record of their growth over time.

At this crossroads in public education, it is incumbent upon teachers to blend both the high tech and high touch experiences into the teaching of writing. The Sul Ross University students discovered that the online writing program was a task-appropriate tool that empowered learners to create compositions, edit their work, and collaborate with other students and their teachers in the writing process.

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 MYAccess affords teachers the opportunity to meet the challenges outlined by CCCC in their position statement. By using the computer wisely for writing instruction, teachers may help students gain greater facility in the digital environment. Furthermore, students may create their own e-portfolio that they can share with a wide audience beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Using the MYAccess program, students have opportunities to be reflective as they review their own writing over time.   They also may create a collection of writings that integrates multiple subjects. Most importantly, student may take responsibility for their own writing.   The e-portfolio that they create may be a lifelong collection that they continue to expand over time.

Technology will never take the place of a classroom teacher. However, students in the Sul Ross course concluded that technology is the familiar context of today's students, and MyAccess can be a tremendous tool in teaching the writing process. It is time for educators to bring the value of technology-rich learning into the writing process for the benefit of their students and themselves. By using an online writing program, students receive immediate guidance for editing, and their teachers have more time to provide individualized writing instruction for each student.

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