Writing the future: Using 21st Century learning tools to put creativity into boys’ writing

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Abstract

Boys and digital technologies appear to be a natural union. Boys and storytelling also seem a natural pairing. Boys and creative writing via the traditional mean of putting pen to paper, however, does not seem a natural union, and seems to kill the creativity that so spontaneously appears when boys are chatting freely. How can what is natural in boys be fostered and flourish, especially in the middle years when boys seem to read less for leisure and find creative writing a trial? Concerned for my Year 6 boys lack of interest in creative writing, I developed an action research project to investigate if marrying indigenous creation stories with digital technologies would breathe life into the creative writing process for the boys.

Rationale

St. Mark’s School of Texas is a school steeped in academic tradition. From models of instruction to curriculum development, the school’s methodology for teaching the writing process has followed a structured and well-defined path. A majority of St. Mark’s graduates, who spent years learning the elements of a well crafted essay, look back on their time at St. Mark’s as a formative experience in the development of their writing style and technique.

With extremely positive results from boys who have drawn on their writing experiences at school to conquer their university literature and writing classes, it would seem our writing model is successful, with little change necessary. Many boys argue, however, that writing is a mundane task, and that interest in, and passion, for creative writing greatly diminishes from the start of the middle school years until graduation. For many students,
writing papers and essays is seen solely as a hoop to jump through in order to achieve university admissions or pass their classes.

One possible way to counteract the boys’ negative sentiments towards writing would be to infuse the youngest grades with a renewed sense of the writing process. By incorporating elements of digital technology and permeating the writing process with opportunities for hands on engagement, will students in the middle schools find greater enjoyment in writing? This question has particular relevance in Year 6 at St Mark’s where students begin writing weekly weekend essays in a variety of formats and participate in both creative and research-based writing projects; their first formal writing assignments as middle school students.

As technology becomes habituated into our classrooms at St Mark’s, with students recording homework online, checking schedules on smartphones and interacting with classmates and teachers via blogs and forums online, the natural next step would be to include digital technologies in our learning and teaching strategies. Further, it would be worthwhile to investigate, through an action research process, the integration of digital technologies specifically into the boys’ creative writing process.

If action research is critical in helping educators to develop and experiment with various strategies to determine the effectiveness of their pedagogy, and “to generate or enhance practical knowledge” (West, 2011, p. 89), then an exploration using this process should elicit knowledge on how digital technologies can foster creativity. My research question became: How does the inclusion of digital technology enhance boys’ creative writing in Year 6 Humanities?

**Literature Review**

Writing is one of the fundamental elements of communication for a majority of cultures across the globe. Being able to clearly dictate one’s thoughts is a skill that is inherently important in navigating the world as students, professionals and global citizens. With an increasingly interconnected global scene that communicates via text messaging, email and Internet websites, the ability to effectively write, communicate, and think creatively have become general capabilities across all subjects in today’s formal learning environments. As Sweeny (2012) notes in her article regarding the development of new
literacies to support writing instruction for the instant message and text message generation, “the Digital Age is synonymous with rapid change,” and combined with the fact that “this Internet era is fundamentally different from the era in which most teachers went to school... it will define the literacy and communication practices for a generation” (p. 122).

In previous decades, educators focused on teaching reading and writing as individual elements within a curriculum, each distinctly in its own realm (Sweeny, 2010). The current professional world, however, is clearly influenced by the rapid change of pace induced by the advent of technology. Today’s students will encounter a 21st century workplace that will require multimedia literacy and creative problem-solving to address the world’s ever-changing landscape. Being able to write, and thereby communicate ideas, theories and new perspectives, utilizing technology and elements of creativity, will continue to be at the cornerstone of this new digital age. For today’s adolescents, as members of a generation coming of age during a digital era, writing has developed a new meaning and figures prominently into a variety of ways they interact, socially and academically (Sweeny, 2010).

As technology becomes an element that is present in more and more classrooms, current educational research has begun to focus on the effects of programs and devices that promote digital forms of learning. Many researchers have found that students who use digital technologies in the writing process see increased positive elements, ranging from better and more effective organization of writing, a more structured approach to proofreading, spellchecking and revisions and easier access in creating a finalized product (Dixon, Cassady & Cross, 2005).

Many 21st century learners brought up in a collaborative and social media environment, are “expected to process information in the formal educational environment using traditional pedagogies” (Donovan, Green & Hartley, 2010, p. 424). For boys, this is an anathema to their preferred learning styles. As King and Gurian (2006) note, teachers tend to “view the natural assets that boys bring to learning - impulsivity, single-task focus, spatial-kinesthetic learning and physical aggression - as problems” (p. 57). Instead of integrating these natural assets with learning and teaching strategies that cater for these
traits, such as those strategies involving digital technologies, boys are forced to learn to write creatively using traditional strategies.

Craft (cited by Shepherd in *The Guardian*, 2009) notes, “There is an enormous willingness to embrace creativity in the classroom, but an increasing lethargy in the system too.” Craft also considers Robinson as someone who has worked hard to change the way we perceive the creative curriculum, and agrees that tweaking what we are doing is not good enough – a new way of helping our boys to be imaginative, risk-taking collaborators is imperative. For boys to write creatively, teachers need to be risk takers as well. Teachers need to trial strategies that are unfamiliar. Teachers need to walk awhile in the world of their students and try on their worldview. Teachers also need to consider ways to foster creativity, to be mindful of encouraging, from a young age, children’s ideas and possibilities, and to ensure we open up pathways that engage and facilitate imagination, not suffocate it (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004).

Within the nexus of digital technology, boys’ education and the new landscape of fostering creativity in the 21st century learner, boys may find that creative writing is something that engages them and liberates their imagination. After all, aren’t boys the biggest storytellers?

**Research Context**

St. Mark’s is an independent boys’ day school based in the Episcopal tradition, in Dallas, Texas. The boys learn about different cultures though an integrated approach within the Humanities curriculum, where literature, historical understanding and composition are nurtured. At the Year 6 level, the History curriculum is centered on surveying early human origins across various continents. While my students thoroughly enjoyed learning about the historical aspects of early world civilizations, they were less than enthusiastic about the language arts part of the course. Even when given opportunities for creative writing on subjects of their choosing, the results at the beginning of the school year were often half-hearted attempts to create a document “just to turn in for a grade.” I perceived the boys’ levels of creativity and interest in the writing process as being relatively low in comparison to their interest in the history content, and I sought to find ways to enhance student interest and performance in the area of writing through alternative methods of
producing written work, especially those that would augment aspects of creativity and technology in the classroom.

**Participants**

The participants were my Year 6 Humanities classes (34 boys) whom I taught daily for one and a half hours. The general outline of the research project was explained to students in an age appropriate manner, and all students and parents received information outlining the proposed research, as well as a permission sheet to sign. Ethical and legal concerns focused on anonymity of student identity in any published works or pictures, as well as ensuring that any participation was entirely voluntary and no student would be penalized for not consenting to participate. Students could withdraw from the participation phase at any point and their work, ideas and commentary would not be included in any data analysis or findings. All 34 students and parents consented to involvement in the project.

**Action**

Over the course of several weeks, the boys worked on a multiple step project based around Aboriginal Australian creation stories, commonly known as Dreaming stories. Our frontloading activities included opportunities to read and listen to original Dreaming stories from various Aboriginal Australian groups, and also to view Aboriginal Australian artwork and learn about their creation stories. Once we had gathered significant background knowledge, history and visual imagery on Dreaming stories, we began the formal research focused on engaging the boys in the creative writing process through a structured approach incorporating digital technologies.

Each boy worked with a peer to brainstorm and outline their own creation story, featuring Australian animals and landscapes and integrating a lesson or moral. After writing a rough draft, students began work on the final touches of their stories and the first drafts of the artwork that would accompany their stories within a video format. Using a variety of media, the boys finalized their papers and created four or more panels of accompanying artwork. With both of these elements completed, we headed to the computer lab to fuse together the artwork and story into a video; each student reading their written story out
loud. The artwork and video component were synchronized to create an audio-visual storybook experience, featuring each boy’s written tale and artwork.

**Data Collection**

The data collection for this action research included a multiple-pronged approach in order to provide a variety of qualitative perspectives, and to help triangulate the data for assessing validity. The data included:

- Pre and post survey responses
- Samples of student work, such as artwork and creative writing excerpts
- Field observations, which included teacher log notes and photographs of students working and creating in the classroom
- Individual participant interviews
- Post-project group discussion

Since the project was based around changes in engagement and enthusiasm for the creative writing process, the pre-survey was initiated to gain baseline information. The survey included questions to gauge student interest in creative writing, level of enjoyment for the activity and how often they used digital technology outside of the classroom. Conversely, the post-survey asked questions that focused on students’ attitudes and opinions regarding their enjoyment of creative writing and overall interest in the subject matter, with the purpose of determining what, if any, changes occurred in student perspectives as a result of the action research intervention. Surveys were completed anonymously; each student was assigned a number and wrote this number at the top of each survey they completed.

As the project progressed, samples of student work were examined against a scaled rubric to provide students with an idea of where they were in terms of our traditional grading environment. Students also filled out their own rubrics to stay on track and to hold themselves accountable throughout the process. Although these rubrics did not count towards an overall academic grade, student work samples including art and writing excerpts were analyzed to determine engagement and work levels in the class at large.
Field observations including teacher log notes and photographs of students working became an important part of the project process, as they helped to record student commentary, daily changes and the growth of creativity that occurred within the framework of the project.

Participant interviews and the group discussions provided an important perspective on the process as a whole, as the boys were able to comment on their own personal involvement and engagement in terms of the creation process. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and were transcribed into notes using a computer based dictation program. The interviews were conducted at the end of the project, giving the students a chance to reflect on their experiences and note key highlights and concerns they encountered throughout the process.

Finally, participants engaged in a 45-minute group discussion to provide their perspective on the different techniques used to create their stories, and to express their feelings and give feedback about any change in their learning.

**Data Analysis**

As students completed the various steps of their projects, their stories and artwork were analyzed and evaluated using a rubric scoring system. Students also filled out their own rubrics as they worked, grading themselves on various categories related to creativity and the writing process. For example, the following categories were included on the teacher-recorded rubric:

- Skillfully combines story elements around a controlling idea to reveal a thought provoking theme or moral
- Suspense and dialogue skillfully advance the plot, give insight into characters and keep the reader continually informed/entertained
- Anecdotes, sensory details and examples skillfully create a clear sense of characters’ thoughts, actions and appearances

These categories were judged under the headings: Above Expectations, Proficient, Meeting Expectations and Below Basic Level. Each subsequent heading indicated the level at which a student was meeting the requirements outlined in the original categories
listed above. The student rubric closely followed the format of the teacher rubric. 
Example questions on the student rubric included:

- Anyone can follow the main story line easily, and all the events are coherent.
- The main story line is clear, and the development of the story is very logical and easy to follow.
- Writing includes a strong beginning, middle, and end, with some transitions and good closure

These rubrics, while not graded, were analyzed by charting students’ responses in a color-coded format. Each box on both the teacher and student rubrics was shaded in to provide a visual model of a particular student’s efforts. The results, in total, were evaluated using a bar graph method, to determine how many students scored the highest rating for each category and so on down through the leveled ratings. Student self-scores were compared with teacher-based rubric scores as well, although these scores were not analyzed, but were used as a completion checkpoint and to keep student work on track via forward progress.

The interview transcripts were coded for common trends, such as discussions of creativity or the use of technology. For example, if a student mentioned excitement or enthusiasm for creative writing, the transcript was highlighted with a specific color. If a student mentioned or discussed innovative use of technology, those comments were tagged in a different color. Following the color-coded themes allowed me to narrow down some key elements that a majority of the students seemed to latch onto during the experimental process.

The surveys, given at the beginning and end of the project work, provided a baseline from which to determine student attitudes, interest and engagement with creative writing and any applicable changes that occurred over the length of the project. The survey responses were compiled at the beginning of the project work and then again after the post-survey. Tracking a variety of categories, such as change in interest in creative writing, across both surveys helped to determine if the effect of the action on students’ engagement in the creative writing process.
Discussion of Results

Evidence of increased engagement and enthusiasm regarding writing

Overall, students showed evidence of being more engaged and enthusiastic about the writing process. Comparing baseline data gathered from the pre-survey with follow-up data gathered from the post-project questionnaire, many boys saw their response to the following question change:

**Pre-Survey:** In general, do you enjoy the creative writing process?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No, not at all</th>
<th>A little bit</th>
<th>Quite a bit</th>
<th>Yes, definitely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Post-Survey:** Did you enjoy the creative writing process we just completed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No, not at all</th>
<th>A little bit</th>
<th>Quite a bit</th>
<th>Yes, definitely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student observation notes also indicated that students were quick to focus on the material at hand and were excited to begin each step of the creative writing process. The boys were noted as being more collaborative, helping one another to edit and revise their work, often commenting on their video component or aiding one another with computer glitches and mishaps.

Using technology in a non-traditional word processing format was a highlight of the design process, allowing students to explore a new medium for their writing. This fact alone illustrated that elements of creativity were being fostered as students engaged more fully in the writing process, and perhaps that an element of competitiveness was becoming evident as boys edited their work for an unknown future audience. Student interviews indicated that many boys felt that they were able to use their skills as a writer in a unique way by incorporating digital technologies in an entirely new context, something that one student described as, “a way to combine something that I’m good at...”
computers] with something that I need to work on [writing] but I could do it in a fun way.” Another student noted that he was more engaged with this project because, “the writing part wasn’t just about words on paper. It kind of came alive for me when I could make my story like the movies I see in my head when I am reading on my own.”

After the work had been completed and the project was finished, many students commented that they truly enjoyed the experience and were looking forward to engaging in more creative writing outside of the classroom, especially now that they had experience bridging elements of technology into the writing process equation.

**Students were less focused on grades and rubric scores**

The students indicated that they were less focused on grades and rubric scores and more focused on their final project, displaying a new found sense of pride about their writing. While these projects were graded using a rubric style system, the typical grading checkpoints (outline, first draft, revisions, final copy) were eschewed. Students engaged in peer-to-peer feedback, using guiding questions and a simple rubric with a place for additional commentary to offer suggestions and changes to their classmates’ stories. As the focus strayed away from academic achievement grades towards creativity within the work process, students noted that they felt “free to try different ideas out,” since they did not feel their final project would be penalized under the traditional grading umbrella.

Since students were more inclined to delve into the writing/creating process as their engagement increased, I also noted that their enthusiasm and interest in the project continued beyond the walls of the classroom. Many students emailed me from home and over the weekend during the seven-week process, with new ideas or questions about additions or deletions they needed to make. I also noted that students were quicker to become immersed in the subject matter and work at hand. This excitement also led the boys to try and schedule additional appointment times and after-school work sessions to make up for missed time due to illness or absence. Previously, these same students would have to be tracked down throughout the school day in order to schedule make-up assignments or to establish a plan of action after missing school time.
Alternative writing method allowed students of all learning styles and abilities to find areas in which to shine

Students self-reported that, while it was important to continue to develop composition skills via traditional writing techniques, having an alternative assignment utilizing digital technology was a vital element in promoting their creative writing in the classroom. During the interviews, one student noted that while he was not a fan of English or composition in general, being able to bring his work to life in conjunction with art frames made the whole process “pretty much more enjoyable and less of a hassle.” Other students noted that using technology and learning how to format an audio-visual storyboard added an element of “curiosity” to the writing process, as they had to learn new skills and try new techniques in order to complete the task at hand.

For visual learners, creating accompanying art pieces was a way to help them bridge the gap between the writing process and their specific style of learning. One boy said that he built his story “based around the pictures in my head as I thought of them, instead of trying to think of words to make a mental movie. I started with the pictures first and worked backwards!” By requiring an artistic and creative element to the writing process, many boys were able to engage more fully with the writing process as they also had the opportunity to use their hands and various media to bring their ideas out of their minds and onto paper.

Although student responses on the post-project questionnaire were anonymous, a few students reiterated their change in status from someone who did not like creative writing at all to a student who it enjoys it quite a bit. One boy said, “doing projects like this helped me to see that writing doesn’t just have to five paragraphs and a title.” This same student, a self-described “math and science guy”, then proceeded to discuss with the interview group his ideas about writing and creating a movie script detailing a science experiment gone wrong.

Creativity begins with anxiety, has levels of tension before the creative moment.

With the knowledge that they would be reading and recording their written work on camera, the boys noted that the revising and editing phases of the paper writing experience took on new meaning, as they did not want to be embarrassed by making
mistakes on the video component of the project. As noted by the students, the editing and revising stage is often the least valued component of the writing process and can be an element that is entirely skipped over by those students who find it cumbersome and boring. With the added incentive of recording their written work, however, the boys found a renewed sense of importance for editing and revising their work. They spent a good deal of time in class editing and rehearsing with other students in order to perfect their language, grammar and syntax in the lead up to the recording phase. They experienced a sense of flow as they began to own their work.

**Conclusion**

Did the boys discover their creative self during this first cycle of action research? The findings suggest that the addition of digital technologies to the traditional writing process produced higher levels of interest and involvement from Year 6 boys, raising their engagement in the writing process and the research process. They were prepared to both dig deeper into the creation stories they had read, and to understand the ideas more fully in order to re-create their own stories.

The structured timeline to the project, combined with the initial collaborative steps taken by students, helped the boys to mold their project. Making artworks to visually tell each student’s Dreaming story added to the involvement and engagement in the project. The fact that the boys had to use a variety of art tools unearthed not only inherent artistic creativity in many of them, but helped them to develop a better sense of their characters and landscapes in their written work. They had no issue going over their artworks to add more detail nor did they mind revising their written words to reflect their visual work.

For some students the extended time in which to complete their projects was a distracting factor, especially for those students who were more competent. Those students who struggled with the writing process, however, were enthusiastic about the additional time and added guidance throughout the process.
Implications of the Study on Practice

Overall, this project laid the cornerstone for the development of other cycles involving ways to infuse and innovate using digital technologies within the context of the writing process. I am hoping to continue my research by utilizing spoken dictation software as a key component of the writing process, thus eliminating the written draft and using oral storytelling as the basis for developing a creative writing assignment.

Reflection

This project was a powerful tool that helped me align my ideas within the larger framework of creativity, technology and collaboration in boys’ education. While I strive to include these components in my everyday work in the classroom, developing and carrying out a detailed plan involving data collection and analysis was an important part in understanding how all of these crucial elements of modern day education come to light in my classroom. While I was not surprised by my findings, the process shed light on innovative ways to reach my Year 6 students.

Professionally, I have been spurred on by this project to continue to explore ways in which to develop the writing process for my students. This project certainly helped me to feel more confident in my abilities as an educational action researcher and to also seek new ways to infuse the classroom with more instances of technology in order to encourage and incite the hidden reserves of creativity in my students.

References


