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“Virtual Writing Conferences” as a bridge between the university and classroom contexts

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Abstract:

We define a “virtual writing conference” as focused, written dialogue between two writers using computer technologies. In this study, we have worked with a cohort of exit year students in a university (all completing their final year of study for a Bachelor of Education degree) and Grade Five children in an elementary school (aged 10 – 11 years) and explored their virtual interaction. The children created electronic texts in their classrooms. These were examined by the university students, who then responded to the children using the tracking tool in Microsoft Word. In this paper we present an embedded case study from our research. Analysis of Kate’s experiences shows how her virtual interactions with a child empowered her as an educator. In particular, her connections between university studies and classroom application will be explored as she reflected upon her learning.

Introduction

‘Millennial learners’ describes today’s children and many young adults; they are heavily influenced by ICT, prompting the contention that they must be taught using the technology with which they are familiar (Dede, 2005; Oblinger, 2003). Supporting the observation that young people exist in a technology rich environment, Sefton-Green and Nixon (2003) identify screen based texts as the most prevalent medium used by children now; such texts require the reader to process not only letters and words, but also such features as sound, music and images (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Similarly, technology is acknowledged to permeate the lives and daily routines of young adults (which includes many early career teachers) as they engage with it in a variety of ways (Roblyer, 2006; Sanford & Hopper, 2001). Christie (2005) challenges educators ‘...in the advent of the new technologies to welcome the opportunities they offer in terms of making meanings, in interesting and useful ways’ (p. 186). Such

challenge seems appropriate to issue to early career teachers and their students; two generations frequently identified as comfortable and competent with technology. In classrooms, ICT allow teachers to structure tasks differently for individual learners while adhering to the rationale and purpose of their planned learning experiences (Kervin & Mantei, 2006). Such an approach to teaching and learning supports Harste's (2003, p. 11) call for the provision of regular opportunities for learners to delve into 'problems of personal and social relevance' in an effort to develop critical and creative thought.

Authentic use of technology has not been widely incorporated into the learning and teaching experiences designed for early career teachers (Johnson, 2005), leaving them less than prepared for the demands of teaching these 'millennial learners' and perhaps frustrated that they are not encouraged to use their technological skills to facilitate classroom learning experiences. The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (2005) emphasized the importance of teacher education in developing 'artful teaching' strategies that respond to the diverse needs of children. This report further highlights the need for literacy teachers to have knowledge not only of language and literacy systems, but also about how school resources can be best used to support student learning (p. 13).

The capacity to use computers and the internet to communicate at speed with others is acknowledged to be a notable change brought about by technology (Christie, 2005). The use of computer-based technologies to enable communication between pre-service teachers and primary school children is documented as a positive experience for pre-service teachers and learners alike (for example, Ceprano & Garan, 1998; Jenkins & Earle, 1999; Moutray, 1998), but Novinger and Smith (2003) question labeling these interactions as positive without careful analysis and evaluation of the power imbalance between adult and child and the ways that this positions the child. Novinger and Smith (2003, p. 434) conclude that the goal of such interactions should be to position children as 'writers who have authority over their own writing – and for teachers to create such opportunities'. Peterson (2005) warns against making the assumption that such empowerment and engagement will result from the mere presence of ICT in the classroom, explaining that it is teacher-designed opportunities that result in student engagement rather than the technology itself. This carefully considered use of ICT to support literacy learning is identified as fundamental in not only empowering children as writers but also in shifting a teacher's expectations of a child's potential for achievement (Peterson, 2005) within the broadened context of 'literacy' (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

The context for our research

The Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong was formed in 1984 from the amalgamation of the former Department of Education of the Faculty of Arts of the university, and the nearby School of Education (Institute of Education). Since its formation, the total enrolment of undergraduate and postgraduate students in this faculty has grown to approximately fourteen hundred. The areas of pre-service teacher education include Early Childhood, Primary (Elementary), Secondary and Physical & Health Education. In the Bachelor of Primary degree, students study a course focused on English teaching each year.

A Bachelor of Teaching degree can be completed over a three-year period (full time). Each year two semesters are offered (autumn and spring); a full time student can study up to four courses per semester. Successful completion of the three-year degree qualifies the participant to teach in primary (elementary) schools within the state. Upon completion of a Bachelor of Teaching degree, participants are eligible to apply for a fourth year of study to complete the Bachelor of Education (Primary) or apply for Bachelor of Education (Honors) degree. This qualification enables the participant to teach in most other Australian states and overseas. During this fourth year of study there are compulsory courses for students, and curriculum elective courses (one of which focuses on English teaching). All courses in this year have an embedded research focus to promote reflective practices amongst students.

The research project

In 2006 we facilitated virtual writing conferences between a cohort of 15 Bachelor of Education university students and one class of 24 Grade Five children. The university students were all completing a curriculum elective course focused on English teaching, which was taught by the researchers. Each student was teaching on either a casual or permanent basis across the early childhood to Grade Six sectors. We were acutely aware that although the literature reports on the development of relationships between teacher and learner, little is known about the power of a virtual writing conference between an adult (in this research, university student) and a child in supporting the child's writing development while also informing the student's pedagogical development and understanding of the writing process. Motivated by the need to know more about how teachers can adapt to the literacy paradigm that recognizes and integrates ICT within classroom literacy experiences, we directed our investigation into the affordances of the concept of the "virtual writing conference". In this paper, we present one case to investigate:

- What structures, processes and relationships can be identified within the virtual writing conference experience?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the virtual writing conferences and the professional growth of an early career teacher in the teaching of writing?

The "virtual writing conference" experience

Over a thirteen week semester the students engaged in a focus on English and professional practice. At the beginning of the semester, the students identified their need for particular focus on the teaching of writing.

Prior to beginning the actual conferencing process between the university students and the Grade Five children, we worked with the teachers on what constitutes 'good' writing. Initially when posed with the question 'what constitutes good writing?' the students focused on the actual mechanics of writing – including elements such as spelling, sentence structure, grammar and handwriting in their responses. After some probing, prompting and questioning from the researchers, the students moved to consider elements such as meaning, creativity and language usage in their responses. At this time, the Grade Five class teacher was invited to join the students and researchers in their workshops to ensure that we would be approaching the forthcoming virtual writing conferences from a common understanding. Students had

opportunity to peruse and rank a range of writing samples, justifying their ranking using the criteria for good writing that they had devised. They had considerable opportunities to work through this process in small group and whole group contexts with the support of the researchers and class teacher.

To begin the virtual writing conference process the students were issued with examples of student writing and asked to consider the response they might make to further the child's development. During this process support for the students was provided through opportunity for questions and the deconstruction of examples of tracked responses. This provided the students with a common understanding of the process of analyzing and responding to a student's writing and presented some guidelines for the ways they might respond to the students they were working with. A key part of the discussion at this time was about the depth and detail of feedback that would be appropriate in constructing a response to the students.

The first pieces of writing from the Grade 5 children were emailed to the early career teachers prior to our scheduled workshop, providing time to peruse and familiarize themselves with the texts they were to respond to. The students then responded to their individual student's writing. This was done within the context of the workshop in a computer laboratory with the support of both researchers and their peers.

The students continued to investigate electronic versions of student work product as they were received via email throughout the session. On receiving a sample, they were expected to begin independent analysis, responding to the student using the tracking tool in Microsoft Word. Before returning the email, the students met with either researcher to talk through their response. This process provided the teachers with the 'safety-net' of input from a more experienced educator, while at the same time affording them the opportunity to articulate and reflect on the choices they had made in responding to the writing.

Kate's experiences

A graduate from the University of Wollongong with a Bachelor of Teaching in 2005, Kate took her first appointment as a classroom teacher in 2006. During this year she taught Kindergarten for two days and Grade Five for two days each week. She used her fifth day to study for a Bachelor of Education (honors) degree. Her school of employment was in the southwest of Sydney and was situated in a low-socio economic area. It was recognized within its education system for having a high staff turnover each year. Kate was one of four beginning teachers at the school in this year of inquiry.

As an early career teacher, Kate identified that she experienced many challenges. An area of particular focus for her was implementing the theory she had been exposed to in her university studies to the classroom context. She stated, "*...you know the theory and the content – but how does this translate into action? The classroom? The preparation of teaching materials? Talking to the parents? Working as a team with other teachers, a grade partner? ... I learned pretty quickly that teaching was so much more than churning out assignments!*"

Kate revealed to the researchers that she found the opportunity to engage in critique of a child's writing, in a supportive university context, to be exciting but challenging. Much of the experience she had had with analyzing writing samples in her studies was with samples housed within departmental websites with *"someone else's critique"*.

In the "virtual writing conference" process, Kate was allocated two Grade Five children to work with. Initially Kate revealed, *"It was hard not knowing the backgrounds of the students ... you had to assume things"*. Kate explained that when she first looked at the samples and began to think about how to respond to them, she felt *"... confronted as I assumed knowledge about the children who I didn't really know, I didn't know how much work they had, or hadn't put into their writing, what was an achievable goal for them and how my response would affect all that"*.

When reflecting upon the initial reactions of the students in this lab session, Kate recalled, *"In the labs we did so much talking. We were shocked at how different the samples were"*. There was much discussion amongst the students about how to respond to the range of samples produced by the children. Kate spoke about the need for *"equity with the feedback"* for the children, giving the example *"... responding to a four line piece of writing compared to a page!"* Kate also drew upon her own professional experience teaching Grade Five, observing that the process *"...required me to reflect on the feedback I give to my students when I mark their writing. Reading and tracking [Maddison's] work made me carefully consider what I said and how I scaffolded her writing ... I found myself asking many questions when tracking [Maddison's] work as I was thinking of students in my class who would have produced writing similar to [Maddison's]"*.

Field notes taken by the researchers revealed that it appeared to take the students a significant period of time before they physically began to type into the Word document. When Kate was asked about this, she described, *"we talked about what you should work on first ... for those who hadn't been in the classroom and even those who were it was a really relevant and practical thing to do – but scary!"* However, Kate revealed that *"once I trusted myself to provide feedback" she was "surprised at how much I could tell from looking at the writing"*.

In discussions with Kate after this initial experience she kept coming back to the accountability connected with the feedback a teacher provides to children. She described, *"I had never seriously considered marking a student's work ... I had to think about what to write, how to write it and how this affects the child and their parents and ultimately my reputation as a teacher"*. When responding to the children through writing Kate identified the importance of being *"...reflective of the impact of every word I said as a teacher to a child"*.

Kate described to the researchers that engaging in the "virtual writing conference" encouraged much dialogue amongst the students during the lab sessions, but also before and after these formal class times. She described, *"We all talked lots in the lead up and after the class – we wanted to know if something new had arrived or what feedback had been sent back ... when and what happened"*. Data from other participants confirmed such comments. Kate further described, *"I remember being nervous and excited about the children's response to their writing – I wanted to see*

their reaction, see if they agreed with what I suggested through their self-reflection ... I wanted to hear their answers to the questions I asked”.

In her final reflections Kate recalled *“as I look back at the experience it was powerful ... I had to write feedback and take the accountability that came with that. It also challenged some of the practices I’d seen in the classroom on previous pracs – responding to children in more than just a tick, date and signature”.*

Discussion

The process of the “virtual writing conference” is an example of an authentic task (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003); the task was relevant to the students’ professional learning and allowed for collaboration as solutions were developed. The virtual writing conference provided avenue for university learning experiences to reflect the reality of classroom practice within an environment supported by more knowledgeable others. For Kate, the authenticity came with knowing there was a real child who had created the text and was waiting for her response. Such authenticity was enhanced for Kate with the knowledge that her professional opinion mattered; she had to respond, provide direction, and articulate her rationale.

The case we present in this paper is indicative of some of the broader findings that emerged from our research including:

- The virtual nature of the task empowered the students as they reviewed the writing to make a considered response to individual children rather than immediately reacting to the text
- The extra time provided by the technology appeared to support student learning as they made links between theory and practice
- The anonymity of the computer and transference of message through the Internet appeared to provide a barrier between the author and their reviewer.

Kate was able to make connections between the “virtual writing conference” as a university learning experience but also see possible transference to her professional situation. Students frequently create written text using word processing software in their classrooms. The affordances of software, in this case Microsoft Word, generated a myriad of possibilities for the teachers to facilitate the development of specific writing focused knowledge and skills. The tracking tool embedded within the software, provided a simple way for the teachers to review writing samples to provide a written, personalized commentary for each individual student without making permanent changes to the student’s work. What was more important though, was the accessibility of this software in both the school and home contexts, making it a viable tool for many children.

Concluding Comments

The authentic nature of the “virtual writing conference” affords early career teachers, such as Kate, the opportunity to take on the responsibility of responding to the writing of real children within the supportive environment of the tutorial workshop. Opportunities for the early career teachers to collaborate with both peers and experts allowed them to explore and challenge their teaching philosophies and their understanding of the writing process as they bring theory and practice together.

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