Engaging early career teachers in 'virtual writing conferences' with grade five students

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Engaging Early Career Teachers in “Virtual Writing Conferences” with Grade Five Students

Abstract:

The changing definition of what it means to be literate is well documented within the literature. The familiarity of many students with screen-based texts and their ability to manipulate computer-based technologies, in particular Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), is well understood. There are examples within the literature of how technology can be used to support the writing process (Turbill & Murray, 2006), provide students with control over the phases of text production (Novinger & Smith, 2003) and the need for teachers to create authentic and engaging experiences (Kervin & Mantei, 2006; Peterson, 2005). Taking such perspectives into consideration, we worked with a cohort of early career teachers and one class of Grade Five students to explore how technology could be used to support the students’ writing development, and to empower both the students and the early career teachers as they engaged in regular written dialogue about writing. We refer to this process as a “virtual conference”. In particular, we explore the processes that the early career teachers engaged with as they investigated electronic versions of student work product, responded to the students using the tracking tool in Microsoft Word and reflected on their understandings throughout this experience. Our findings pose implications for what we as educators understand about writing, the creation of text, our responses to this, and to the classroom experiences we make available for students.
Introduction

The climate of the classroom and the workplace has changed, challenging the traditional concept of what it is to be literate (McKenna, Reinking, Labbo & Kieffer, 1998) and, in the process, commands the development of new literacy practices and the rethinking of pedagogical approaches. Anstey and Bull (2006) identify this state of change as a constant in literate practices today, challenging educators to shift from a philosophy of literacy learning as the accumulation of content knowledge to one that fosters the development of strategies to identify problems and investigate creative, sustainable solutions.

The definition of literacy is broadened as computer-based technologies, particularly Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), afford the construction of screen-based multimodal texts, requiring pedagogical shifts in the types of learning experiences provided by teachers. Anstey and Bull (2006) argue that a literate person controls a range of flexible strategies that they independently draw on when processing and responding to changing literacies; these strategies are equally applied to traditional print based and oral texts as well as to the multimodal texts emerging from ICT. If this is the case, as educators we need to consider how we can plan and facilitate experiences within the classroom that encompass and enrich technology in meaningful and pedagogically appropriate ways.

The term ‘millennial learners’ has been used to describe the learning style of today’s children and many young adults; such learners 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 (Robylyer, 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 who are both identified as comfortable 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, in press). 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) emphasised the importance of teacher education in developing ‘artful teaching’ strategies that respond to the diverse needs of children. The 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). Just as primary and secondary educators encourage the development of creative and independent problem solving strategies in their young students, tertiary institutions, too, must foster these skills for pre-service and early career teachers. This is a difficult challenge given teacher education courses are often criticised for presenting fragmented and decontextualised learning experiences (for example, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Ramsey, 2000). Independent and creative problem solving stems from informed, critical thought; teachers would have the opportunity to develop these skills as they use technology to design such an environment for their students (Johnson, 2005).

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 in Novinger & Smith, 2003), but Novinger and Smith (2003) caution against labelling such 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).

In response to such themes within the literature, in 2006 we facilitated virtual writing conferences between a cohort of 15 early career teachers and one class of 24 Grade Five students. The early career teachers were all completing a university subject focused on the English Curriculum. Each 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 a pre-service or early career teacher and a child in supporting the child’s writing development while also informing the teacher’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 recognises and integrates ICT within classroom literacy experiences, we directed our investigation into the affordances of the concept of the “virtual writing conference”. In particular we wanted to investigate:

- What structures, processes and relationships can be identified within the virtual writing conference experience?
- How can the understanding and development of good writing be supported through computer-based technologies for both early career teachers and students?
What is the nature of the relationship between the virtual writing conferences and the professional growth of early career teachers in the teaching of writing? The research was founded upon two competing themes: the need to expand traditional definitions of literacy and the importance of using ICT tools in writing pedagogy, and secondly, how these understandings can be incorporated into the pedagogical practices of early career teachers. In this paper we will explore the experiences of early career teachers as they engage in virtual writing conferences with Grade 5 students.

**Setting the foundations for the experience: Exploring what constitutes ‘good’ writing**

The notion of what constitutes ‘good’ writing continues to evolve along with the wealth of multiliteracies emerging from ICT. While we have known for some time that the writing cycle is made up of a number of recursive stages (Turbill, 1982, Walshe, 1981), we believe that there is a real nexus between writing and the use of technology. Through the use of technology, the stages of writing become more minute and recursive as students engage with pre-writing, during-writing and after-writing stages simultaneously as technology affords composing, editing and publishing on a single draft. The affordances of technology allow the writing process to occur with more iterations and the stages become more ‘blurred’ and combined. Products are typically more professional in appearance, with text printed in a range of fonts and graphics and images easily imported.

The need for writers to have both an audience and purpose for constructing the text has been promoted for some time. Indeed, providing children with an authentic audience is acknowledged to encourage the development of good writing because of the need for a message to be successfully conveyed. Likewise, there is a need for pre-service and early career teachers to have an audience as they ‘learn’ how to respond to students written work product. Reflections on such issues led us to consider, establish and implement virtual writing conferences between Grade Five students and early career teachers.
Prior to beginning the actual conferencing process between the early career teachers and the Grade Five students, we worked with the teachers on what constitutes ‘good’ writing. Figure 1 captures some of the initial brainstorming during these sessions. Initially when posed with the question ‘what constitutes good writing?’ the teachers 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 teachers moved to considering elements such as meaning, creativity and language usage in their responses. At this time, the Grade Five teacher was invited to join the teachers and researchers in their workshops to ensure that we would be approaching the forthcoming virtual writing conferences from a common understanding. Teachers 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. One early career teacher acknowledged, “I find this sort of activity is valuable because many different ideas are brought out as well as also ensuring that your thoughts are on the right track”.

Figure 1: What is ‘good’ writing
Another early career teacher stated,

“thinking about what good writing is was a valuable experience as I had to think about my own beliefs and philosophies on what makes a good piece of writing. Not being confident in my own writing ability at times I definitely believe it is important to have a thorough understanding of your own capabilities and by this ensure that as a teacher you model and pass on the right skills to the students you teach”.

The virtual writing conference experience: establishing relationships and setting boundaries

To begin the virtual writing conference process the early career teachers 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 we provided support for the early career teachers through questions and prompts and by providing examples of tracked responses. Figure 2 provides example of a piece of student writing and shows how it has been ‘tracked’ by a virtual conference partner.
The student’s writing and tracked response was deconstructed during workshops in connection with earlier discussions about what constitutes ‘good’ writing. This provided the teachers with a common understanding of the process of analysing 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. One teacher described being plagued by the question “how much feedback and constructive criticism do you provide a young child?” Another voiced uncertainty about being able to identify exactly what needed changing, “Um, I’d like him to extend on his writing, to be more creative, maybe to – I don’t know!”.

After considerable sustained conversation, the group decided that it would be most appropriate to prioritise the areas that required the most immediate attention and to select these as the focus for teaching. It was also noted by the early career teachers at this time that praise and encouragement for the child’s efforts were particularly important. One teacher explained that she tried to be “as positive as possible” in constructing a response to her student’s writing. By prioritising the needs the early career teachers appeared able to identify the most significant learning opportunities for that child at that time, and acknowledging areas of strength affirmed the level of development the child had already attained. One teacher explained, “choosing only two areas to comment on in my feedback indicated to the student that these are the two most significant at the time while also sending a message that once these are developed then the other areas will be fine tuned”.

The first pieces of writing from the Grade 5 students were emailed to the early career teachers prior to our scheduled workshop, providing time to peruse and familiarise themselves with the texts they were to respond to. The early career teachers 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. One participant acknowledged that upon first receiving the sample “…I felt overwhelmed by the task as I doubted my own ability and authority to provide feedback”. Another described how she felt confronted by the task as she had “…to face my biggest fear of transitioning from the role of a student to a teacher of literacy”.

![Figure 3: Responding to students’ writing during tutorials](image)

Using the strategy where the strengths of the writing are affirmed, and then recommendations made for improvement, provided the early career teachers with guiding principles for responding to the writing. One teacher used this strategy in responding to a student; “I love the way you put ‘long, wavy, honey coloured hair’ it really makes me imagine what your hair is like… what else can you tell me about yourself so that I can picture you a little bit more?”. 

The early career teachers 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 teachers 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.

One of the early career teachers, who was teaching Grade Five at another local school, observed 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]”. Others also made connections between the process of engaging with the virtual writing conference and the subsequent implications the experience presented to their role as educators.

Findings

While we acknowledge the importance of educators providing authentic learning tasks, audiences and purposes for students’ writing, the same needs to be said for teacher learning. McCormack, Gore and Thomas (2004, p. 6) observe that many early career teachers continue to feel that their undergraduate experiences leave them ill-prepared for the realities of teaching - “nothing I did at uni prepared me for this!”. Engaging in virtual writing conferences was observed to allay some of these fears, to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the teaching role and added confidence in being able to meet these challenges. One early career teacher described, “Being engaged in a real-life situation also greatly increased my enthusiasm and significance I placed on the task. The additional effort I put into the completion of this task was due to the fact that the results would be sent to actual students, not hypothetical students”, while another observed that the more of these teaching and learning opportunities she had, “the more effective I’ll be in the classroom as a literacy teacher”.

The process of articulating what constituted ‘good’ writing and then transferring those understandings to actual student work samples appeared to support the early career teachers in making many valuable connections. Initially, many described feeling uncertain about whether the writing that they had received from the Grade 5 student
was ‘good’ or not. One early career teacher described her student’s writing as “a bit short” and another was dismayed at the number of spelling and grammatical errors present in the piece. With further discussion, connections were made between the hypothetical ‘good’ writing the early career teachers had learned about in their studies and the strengths of the real writing they were analysing. One teacher described a significant understanding she had reached; “…the writing a child produces is impacted by numerous components which emphasises the need to know your students and their strengths and weaknesses allowing the teacher to support each individual in their literacy learning”. Our data strongly suggests that the process of the virtual writing conference provided these early career teachers with opportunity to put the theory they had been exposed to about writing development into practice in the analysis of student work product and the subsequent responses they gave.

The early career teachers consistently identified the importance of a focus on spelling and grammar and the integral role they play in the construction of written meaning. They did, however, move beyond this to consider more whole-text issues such as clarity of meaning and the way the child used language to achieve this. An area of considerable interest and debate for the teachers was how the ability for computer software to identify spelling and grammatical discrepancies to the author could be used in ways to support students’ learning. While they acknowledged the limitations of the computer’s spelling and grammar checking applications, it did provide a useful reminder to the writer to check the spelling by using manual proofreading techniques, checking printed authoritative sources and drawing upon the knowledge of peers and their teacher.

The virtual writing conference provided the children and the early career teachers with a forum to talk about writing that was private and tailored to the individual needs of the text’s author. Once boundaries and preliminary guidelines were established to guide the teachers in responding to the text, the teachers expressed surprise at how straightforward the process was to complete. Likewise, our Grade 5 teacher identified a significant advantage of the strategy was that the children could privately access and peruse the personalised response to their writing for as long as they required.

Discussion
The process these early career teachers engaged with through the virtual writing conference is an example of an authentic task (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003); the task was relevant to their professional learning as together, the early career teachers and researchers worked to define the task in ways that encouraged ownership of the process. Support for the individual learning needs of the teachers through careful scaffolding provided the right amount of support for each teacher as they analysed the writing and responded to their students. The virtual writing conference provided avenue for university learning experiences to reflect the reality of classroom practice.

Further, the experience allowed for strong connections to be made between theory and practice. The early career teachers stood upon their understandings of what constitutes ‘good’ writing, drawing on their theoretical understandings and knowledge of mandated syllabus documents to respond to actual student work product. The Internet, coupled with computer-based technologies, made it possible for the teachers to communicate with the students and vice versa across their different contexts and hours of study.

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, personalised commentary for each individual student without making permanent changes to the student’s work. It was a meaningful experience for the students as they received detailed feedback on their writing, but also for the early career teachers as they were able to operate within a supported environment as they analysed and constructed their responses to the students. This activity provided a seamless and effective avenue for teacher feedback on what the student had done well in the text, but also allowed for the identification of areas for improvement, to the benefit of both parties. The teachers’ use of the tracking tool allowed the student to retain power and control over their writing and any editing that would be made. We
believe this process provides example of the ‘promising’ ways technology can be used to facilitate meaningful learning experiences.

The virtual nature of the task empowers both the teacher and the student as they review the documents. For the early career teacher, they have time to carefully review the writing and make a considered response to the student rather than immediately reacting to the text. This extra time provided by the technology supports teacher learning as they begin to link theory and practice. For the student, they too have time to carefully consider the responses made to their writing and decide whether to accept or reject the suggestions made. This in itself is empowering as the anonymity of the computer and transference of message through the Internet provides a barrier between the author and their reviewer, further diminishing the imbalance of power between child and adult that may otherwise have influenced the likelihood of the child simply making the changes because they were recommended by the teacher.

The process of the virtual writing conference encouraged reflection both on and for learning. For the students, they revisited their writing and the detailed feedback provided by the teacher. The teacher’s response affirmed the skills and strategies that they already control, while the recommendations alerted them to certain weaknesses of the message and how it could be improved. For the teachers, the process appeared to lead them to consider what that particular case meant in light of their own professional practice. For some teachers, they felt encouraged to review the feedback they had previously offered to students and how they could perform a more comprehensive analysis. For others it served as a lens through which they were able to identify areas of professional weakness or strength and use it to help set professional goals for themselves.

Conclusion

We believe the virtual writing conference is an authentic learning experience that supports the learning of early career teachers as it enables deep reflection about the theory they have studied throughout their teacher education experience and the ways that the theory is transferred to classroom practice. The virtual conference provides opportunity for early career teachers to make links between the writing they analyse
in their workshops, the writing opportunities they provide in their classrooms and the teaching decisions they then make within a supported environment monitored by more experienced educators. The technology allows tertiary educators to bring the classroom into the tutorial workshop and affords early career teachers the luxury of time to consider the best ways to enrich the development of the skills and strategies of a young author.
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