Surfing the Net: A Writing Workshop for Middle School

Technology

by

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Early in my first year of teaching 8th grade, I had my first experience and my first disaster with students in a computer lab. I had anticipated the experience, if not the disaster, since college, when I had become an advocate of computers to aid the writing process. Now, I was preparing my students for the big event: drafting and revising a process paper in the computer lab. I knew what I thought the students needed to know. I taught them about the cut and paste commands necessary for revision and about the thesaurus and spell check as aids to fine tuning. And these were just for starters. I talked a lot and students busily took notes.

In most classes, five or six out of 22-25 students had previously worked in the computer lab, and I suggested to them that they could be “co-experts” with me, helping the less technologically-informed students. Flooded with feelings of good will towards both my students and the computer lab, I enthusiastically set them working on their drafts. And then came Monday.

This first encounter with the computer lab was a greater learning experience for teacher than students; nothing worked quite as planned. First, although the majority of students had their first draft written, some had never typed before, and the hunt-peck method had to suffice; that meant that the typing-impaired would probably not have as much time to revise as the typing-proficient. Secondly, most of my lecture on computer commands could just as well have been given in Latin for all the sense these directions made to the students. Thirdly, many of the self-proclaimed computer experts didn’t know quite as much as they had suggested, and too often, their eagerly offered help resulted in their classmates losing sections of their drafts. Finally, our twenty-five new Apple computers were not always up and running; we could count on at least three “freeze ups” every class period. The results? For fifty fifty-five minute class periods I ran maniacally from child to child, advising, providing “technical assistance,” offering encouragement, all the time feeling frustrated and inadequate.

Through trial and error over the next few years, I became more adept at preparing students for the lab writing experience, but the frustration of this first experience made me realize how little training I had been given as a preservice teacher to prepare me for the realities of technology in the classroom. Now as an instructor responsible for teacher preparation, I want my students to be ready for work in the computer labs which will support their teaching.
Rationale Behind “Surfin’ the Net: A Writing Workshop for Kids”

“Surfing the Net: A Writing Workshop for Kids” was an English Education/Northern Arizona Writing Project (NAWP) course offered at Northern Arizona University during a five week session in Summer, 1996. The thinking behind the course was very straightforward: I wanted to give my university students the opportunity to work one-on-one with a group of eighth grade students in a computer writing lab. For the middle school students (who would attend class the middle three weeks of the five week session) there would be the opportunity to spend one week researching topics off the Internet before turning their attention to the writing process. For the university students, this would be a way to consider how computer technology functions in conjunction with the writing process in “real” classrooms.

The course was highly compacted. We set out to accomplish a great deal in three weeks. The middle-school students would only be with us for twelve days, for one hour and fifteen minutes each day, and one of those days would be devoted to the authors’ publishing party. That meant that our young authors had to pre-write, draft, peer conference, revise, edit and publish in only eleven days. And while most of the adult students — a combination of university students and local teachers who were interested in finding out more about Internet use in the classroom — had taken a mini-institute on the writing process through the NAWP, there were some students from areas other than English who had little or no experience with writing, much less teaching writing, but who were curious about research using the Internet.

What I would like to share are the experiences of the twenty middle school students, the twenty adult students, and me as we integrated computer technology into the writing process.

Preparing the University Students

After class today, I am extremely anxious/nervous about what we are going to do in here. I am barely familiar with the Internet and computers in general; how am I going to be the “expert” for a child?! ... Maybe my student will be familiar with the Net and can teach me a thing or two. Brooke (University student)

Like Brooke, most of the university students had never “surf the Net” and were very unclear as to what is offered on the World Wide Web. Through modeling — using a computer hookup to a television at the front of the room — the university students and I previewed much of the work we would be doing with the middle school students. For example, the students learned how to direct key searches. I knew that many of the middle school students would express an interest in “sports” or “animals” or other topics that needed to be focused by a key search. As my university students began looking for information on anything from wedding dresses to the screen return of “Star Wars,” they also began experiencing the major problem their middle school students would soon face: screen freeze-up.

These “freeze-ups” were typically brought about by all twenty computers trying to access the Internet at the same time. When most of the middle school students had finished researching on the Internet and were engaged in word-processing, screen freeze ups declined. During the average hour and fifteen minutes we spent daily on the twenty computers available in the lab, we typically saw five to seven computers freeze a day, though rarely the same computers. Rebooting the computer, of course, was our only option for getting back to work, but it also meant that students lost information that they often had had difficulty finding in the first place. As I explained to my vexed students, though, it was necessary for them to experience these computer hassles so that they would know how to handle them with their own middle-school students.

I also wanted my university students to be aware of the multitude of sites — both for instruction and entertainment — that are available on the Net. My first assignment for them was to find five Internet addresses they thought might be useful when working with middle school students. At the same time, as I was providing them with Internet addresses connected to education/English/Language Arts in general — The Folger Shakespeare Theatre, The Smithsonian, The National Council of Teachers of English, The Franklin Institute — they were finding such important listings as “Hercules: The Legendary Journeys,” ESPN’s “Sportsline,” and “Star Wars.”

But when the middle school students arrived, they had no trouble finding sites related to their special
interests without much help from the teachers. The middle schoolers would begin with a “fun” topic like a movie or a sports figure and turn to an appropriate web site for information. As the students found more than they had originally thought they would, the issues they considered became more complicated.

Sites for the Ultimate Fan
Fourth grader Danielle was an avid basketball fan; when she and her NAU teacher Janeen found the Chicago Bulls website, Danielle knew that she wanted to “do” something with player Scottie Pippen but had no real sense of the direction in which she should go with her project. Because the Bulls were in the midst of the NBA championship, Danielle was able to get updates after each game. Many of the Bulls provided comments about their own playing, and Danielle used Pippen’s comments to focus her writing project: she decided she would write Scottie Pippen a letter asking some of the questions that she felt he wasn’t responding to on the website. Looking carefully at the questions other players were being asked, Danielle developed her own set and wrote a business letter to Pippen asking for answers to these questions.

Seeking Nirvana
However, some university students found that the wealth of information, pictures, and interactive possibilities on the Internet created distractions. Like those people we hear about in the news who spend every waking hour glued to their computer screens, some of our middle school students became obsessed with the music, graphics, and pictures connected to their topics. For example, when 8th grade student, Jeff, became aware of the massive variety of pictures of his favorite group, Nirvana; his interest in writing faltered. As his NAU instructor, Taylor, noted:

My expectations have definitely changed since before we started with our students. Today, all Jeff wanted to do was look at pictures of Nirvana which took the majority of our time. In a class with 25 kids who are doing the same thing, I would have to keep them all on track. I think I would allow them to find pictures, but encourage that as a reward after the main information was gathered.

The Trouble with Weimaraners, or “How Do You Spell the Name of This Dog?”
Brooke, another NAU student, struggled with a 4th grade student named Emily. From the first moment of class, Emily knew she wanted to write a poem that drew on information about her favorite breed of dog: the weimaraner. Brooke thought she would have an easy time with this very focused author. This was not the case. Brooke writes:

After an hour of working, Emily decided that she was finished with the ‘Net. She absolutely would not work any longer on finding information for her poem. I could understand her frustrations because first, we had a terrible time trying to find the spelling of “weimaraner” — computer labs still need dictionaries — and the computer would not give us a break on even close spellings! Second, she couldn’t access some of the sites we did find and some others listed the names and addresses of weimaraner breeders and other not particularly fascinating topics. So I made my first teacher-decision. I told her that she could play a game called Amazon Trail for the rest of class. And we did the same thing the next two days until I finally told her that we had deadlines and she must finish her piece before playing games. This experience really opened my eyes to kids’ attention spans, and what makes or breaks them as far as keeping them interested in their research.

Brooke’s failure to access the sites her student wanted was a problem shared by other teachers, and one teachers would need to work with and around when they were in their own classrooms. Unfortunately, as many of us who search the ‘Net have found, web sites are not always up-to-date and sites that are available one month may have disappeared by the next. In view of this, teachers may find it useful to become more knowledgeable about their students’ most often accessed web sites, checking them periodically and letting students know if the sites are still around. The reality, though, is that this can be a very time-consuming task, and teachers need to remind students that a disappearing site may be one of the downsides to working the Internet.

“Murder of a Mouse” … in More Ways Than One
Another potential problem with Internet research is how to safeguard against what students may find as they explore. Many of us are aware of media reports concerning pornographic materials on the Internet. An unsuspecting person may easily stumble onto an inappropriate site. As I was developing the course, my father-in-law told me about an Internet search he had been conducting on Ford trucks; instead of the
Ford logo he expected, what appeared instead on the screen was a stripper named Fannie Ford who offered a preview of her routine.

Taking a proactive approach, I sent out a “Student’s Rights and Responsibilities when Using the Internet” form that had to be read, reviewed and signed by both the students and their parents. The form stated that there was a possibility that a student could find inappropriate material during her research, but I verbally assured parents that this possibility was remote because of the one-on-one nature of the course. Ha. Marcia writes:

My student Sherri, had been typing in “mouse” all morning and we were getting pictures and all sorts of information about mice. Then she somehow hit the “c” instead of the “m” and we had the word “cause,” a word that does not appear in my dictionary, and all of a sudden, the screen filled with a couple engaged in a live action sex show. I hit “Enter” and they disappeared. I don’t think Sherri saw this performance, but I was glad I was right there and moved quickly enough to put out the fire. It’s not something I would want my child finding.

Obviously, no matter how closely teachers monitor their students’ work, there is no way to guarantee that students will not find inappropriate materials on the Internet, whether by design or by accident, unless the teacher or her school systems implements a system by which sites are downloaded and okayed by teachers before the student is given access to the site. This again, however, implies that the teacher has more time than she probably really has to go through and check all of the sites in question.

By the end of the second week of our five week course, all of my students, university and middle school, were essentially finished with the research/Internet aspect of the class. As they moved on to the writing process phase of the course, we had to rethink the notion of teacher responsibility to students as it connects to word processing.

**Drafting Using Internet Research**

The next week found the student groups moving to the drafting stage of the writing process. The most difficult aspect of this shift for both me and the university students was that we expected our middle school students to want to write long pieces integrating their ideas and what they had found on the Internet. The reality for this combination of 4th through 7th grade students was that they were typically satisfied with a one-page draft of whatever they were creating. Emily wrote a twelve line poem about her weimaraner and deemed it “perfect;” another youngster decided that a travelogue showing a Star Wars-like journey he would like to take with a line of description under each picture would “be enough.” Two of the older students were willing to write 2-3 pages, but Jeff, our Nirvana fan, felt that a dated timeline would more than suffice for his writing project. Norman, who was supervising the travelogue creator, commented:
No matter what I suggested, he didn’t want to pursue a project that had more writing in it. Being the “veteran” teacher I am, I folded, let him cop out of the writing, and allowed him to go back to the Internet. This really frustrated me because I felt I had failed to get this kid excited about writing, which to me was the point of the class.

So I sat Jack down and told him that we needed some literature to put in the book we would be publishing. I suggested a story about the collage he was putting together. He wasn’t too excited until I told him that once he finished we could find some more “cool” sites on the ‘Net. Jack became a writing machine. He combined ideas — being an action hero, going on an intergalactic journey — and subjects — Ken Griffey, baseball — that he liked and had found Internet sites about and wrote this great piece of fiction. And I think he was surprised at how well it turned out because he was grinning ear to ear and making everyone read his story. That day I had a role in getting a student excited about something he did. That was the day I knew I had the potential to be a good teacher.

Experiences like Norman’s were fairly typical of the university students who had never really taught beyond a practicum situation; however, the journals indicate that their enthusiasm was tempered by the understanding that when they were dealing with 25 students in one class, creating these special moments with students would take longer and involve more frustration on the part of both teacher and student because the teacher would not have 30 minutes to sit and interact with each student on a regular basis.

My university students also found that during this time that many of their middle school students were, as one put it “keyboard illiterate.” While some of the young writers had keyboarding experience from working on their own home computers, many used the hunt-and-peck method. This, of course, was the same experience I had had with my eighth graders some years before. The students and I worked out some options. Some of the university students offered to type as their students dictated the story/letter, but they let the middle-school students know that they would be in charge of proofreading and making their own changes on the computer. Other teacher-student pairs stayed after class, giving the young author more time to compose. A third group of teachers encour-

aged their students to hand write their drafts in class. Then the teachers took the drafts and typed the pieces out on their own time. Again (am I sounding like a broken record?), the university students realized that this was a luxury made possible because each was working with only one student.

Revising With the Computer
As we had limited time to work with our middle school students, all stages of the composing process were more abbreviated than any of us, with the possible exception of the middle school students, would have liked. However, because the university students had such strong feelings about the importance of revising, they worked hard to make sure that we had time for this part of the process.

In teams, the university students organized a revising day. They modeled revising situations they felt would be most helpful. They shared drafts with the others in the group and asked for revision suggestions. They made up conferencing sheets or encouraged student to make written comments on drafts. In any case, the university students often found that their young charges did not take this stage of writing as seriously as their teachers did, and more often than not, the middle school students did not take other’s suggestions seriously, often refusing to change their writing unless their NAU teacher told them they had to. More than once I heard a student comment to her university instructor, “Remember, we changed this one other time; why do we have to do this again?” Like many of us who compose at the computer, a number of the middle-school students understood that revising using computers is not always a separate step from the drafting process. Many of them had made changes along the way, either because of their own sense of what sounded “correct” as they were writing or because their teacher had offered a suggestion that the student decided to embrace. Most of my NAU students have the same attitude about revising at the computer, but ignored their own writing instincts because of what they considered their “teacherly” duty: to break down the writing process into clearly articulated parts that their students understand and are able to follow. The university students came also to understand that explaining the difference between revision and proofreading was no simple task. As novice teacher Justin notes:

THE QUARTERLY 33
Teaching the concepts of writing is much harder than it seems. Trying to help Mike understand the processes of revision and analyzing mistakes was difficult. Some of the ideas he understood and some he didn't care about. He felt that his initial piece was in final form and only needed punctuation corrections. I tried to show him that just making punctuation changes is not enough and that revision is the most important part of writing. He struggled, but by the end of our time together, I felt that he understood that his second draft should be as important as his rough draft.

**Publishing on the Computer**

I have always believed in publishing student work. In this class we pulled together a booklet of student writing to be shared with classmates, families and friends at a class meeting.

For the majority of the teacher-student teams, preparing for the publishing stage was hectic. There was one last editing check. There was the return to the Internet to gather ideas for drawings they could create to correspond with the texts. They also had to decide how to present their texts, both in the booklet and for the authors’ party. They scanned; they cut and pasted, all the time considering the aesthetics of text presentation. One student created a newspaper. Another circled a drawing with text. Some created colorful posters that correlated with the writing they would read aloud. The computers offered an outlet for student creativity that went beyond the simple word processing aspect most of us take for granted.

**Final Reflections**

In this final section, I would like to consider what conclusions we can draw for teachers who are trying to integrate the writing process and technology in their own classrooms and discuss what those of us who work with the future teachers need to implement in our own classes.

**What the Students Learned about Teaching on the Internet**

Jenna, who had recently finished her student teaching experience, noted that she had had little opportunity to work in the computer lab at her school, even though there had been a lab available.

What I wanted to see in this class was if real students could work in a computer lab environment. I wasn’t disappointed. The majority of the kids took off into computer world and produced some great work. I also learned that some kids are completely distracted by it. Overall, I am of the opinion that students today have to have some experience with technology, even if it is only for three days, or three weeks at a time. It is a requirement in today’s society that one be familiar with the ways of cranky computers, and any exposure could be beneficial. Of course, if the exposure can produce some meaningful, valuable work that a student takes responsibility for and is proud of, so much the better.

In general these beginning teachers saw this class as a way of avoiding the predictable traps when computers become available in a school. The idea of technology in the classroom is a glamorous one, but if teachers lack the substantive knowledge to support the computer use, the computers quickly lose their shine and sit unused in the back of the classroom or become game terminals that serve as reward stations for students who finish their work quickly. Most students in my class now had confidence in their ability to motivate student interest in computer use. Although I had one student admit that she still might not encourage student computer use because she was not sure if she could handle the “frenzy that would probably occur as I’m trying to help twenty-five students at one time.”

The addition of the Internet component adds possibilities and frustrations to the pre-writing and drafting stages of the writing process. The potential for motivating excitement about conducting research is enormous because of the immediacy of the information. Students who have grown up with computers in their homes and classrooms embrace with ease their computer work; they have little fear of the technology and often find it easier to pull information from the Net than from a card catalog or Reader’s Guide.

Nevertheless, the frustration factor is a real one. Web sites come and go with a frequency that leave students questioning how to find information. Screens freeze-up and computers break down when multiple computers are run through one server. However, computers are now front and center in most school districts. Thus teachers need to continue to look for opportunities to connect computer technology with all aspects of class-
room experience. Using the Internet is one way of accomplishing this goal.

**What I Learned About Teaching Future Teachers**

Most of us who work in university education programs know the importance of getting our students out into classrooms long before student teaching. In addition to sophomore or junior year practicums, many universities have set up tutoring sessions between education students and students in local schools; the writing course offered through the Northern Arizona Writing Project (NAWP), for instance, sends students out for a minimum of twelve hours in classrooms of teachers who have completed an NAWP institute.

But the experiences the students had in the “Surf the ‘Net” course provided opportunities for a teacher in training to work one-on-one with a student involved in the writing process, an experience not possible in large group practicum situations or during tutoring opportunities where the focus is often on remediation of student errors. While this is an artificial experience in the sense that as teachers we are rarely lucky enough to have the time to work one-on-one as the students in this course did, my students were able to realize some of the challenges they would face in the classroom. They all learned to adapt and be flexible, making adjustments appropriate to the child with whom they were working. And as Brooke summarized in her final reflection for the course:

> Yes, I was extremely frustrated at times and I wanted to say things to Emily like “concentrate, do your work, no you cannot play the Amazon Trail game today.” But I held myself in check because I wanted her to develop an interest in the computer and Internet and in different ways she could learn to write. I think I accomplished those goals with her even as I became more comfortable with my teaching future. I had never been responsible for teaching someone by myself. Today, I know that I can meet the challenges of teaching using a variety of instructional tools and exceed my own expectations.

After several weeks “Surfing the Net” Brooke is able to make this claim with greater justified confidence, than I was able to entering that computer lab with my eighth graders not so many years ago.

**References Useful in Planning and Teaching a Course Focused on Computers**


*English Journal* 84, (6). The theme of the journal that month was “The Electronic Classroom”.


