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Inside the Digital Classroom

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The telltale burst of computer startup music punctuates the room as we begin our ninety-minute English class at a rural Maine high school. Some students have arrived early, mid-way through lunch, to browse online before their surfing range is focused for our work; and others straggle in just after the bell, grab the last laptop from the cart, and wait for the wireless connection to recover from the surge of twenty-five new entrants to our ramp onto the digital highway. In different ways, my students experience the sense of accomplishment that comes with their transformation into probing writers and insightful, critical readers. They use computers, MP3 recorders, digital cameras, video, and music to investigate themselves, the world around them, and the ways that things fit together, or sometimes don't. It's never perfect, often messy, and periodically snarled with glitches. But learning and creating happens in many ways.

- Maine students trade life stories on a daily basis with kids in California.
- Students and their teacher share revision ideas through a private online forum.
- Book reviews, self-help tips, abuse prevention resources, and resiliency strategies highlight a student-produced calendar to help stem a local suicide epidemic.
- Teens write about something they have learned or a place that holds a special meaning to them, and then combine images, writing, narration, and music to create a digital story.

- Novice journalists print the news they gather in an online newspaper, then convince the computer lab director to make their work the homepage of every computer in the lab.
- We share digital photos of our world on Flickr, and then write about the images we select.

As new students arrive in my classroom every semester, our use of technology changes as well. The work of my students takes a new shape as they develop their own connections to books, find writing topics that inspire multimedia responses, and explore links with other teachers and different classrooms. Technology and the promise it holds to motivate and empower my students remains a constant part of my classroom.

The Debut

As I make the last-minute adjustments to an LCD projector, Jake, an eighteen-year-old senior who will barely graduate if he holds out for the next two months, paces in front of the chattering crowd of 350 teenagers. He isn't a guy who shows chinks in his self-esteem, and if anyone were to call him a writer, he would have quickly fired back a standard, "Yeah, right."

Today was different. We were screening *Crosswalk Terror*, a three-minute public service announcement that Jake and his team had completed just hours before. The video is predictable: an aging Chevy careens up the school driveway, hard rock blaring from the speakers, just in time for the local football star to amble unwittingly through the crosswalk. No mystery, just suspense and hysterical, slow-motion, multi-angle stunt flips surrounding a clear message: drive safely. I had seen the film a dozen times, and taking advantage of a school-wide assembly, I coaxed the boys into showing off their work.

Jake, Bruce, Frank and Jerry did not usually have their work showcased. Their school identity came through their pushed-back ball caps, Carhartt jackets, and the rumble of their trucks tearing out of the parking lot. Standing at the front of the auditorium as the crowd quieted, the boys looked as though they were about to issue a public apology.

I remember Jake in the moments before we killed the lights. "But Mr. Boardman, it's not real good."

"Trust me," I told him. "They're gonna love it."

The raucous crowd didn't let us down, and my team of four filmmakers, guys who'd seen more time in detention than any other students I'd known, were blushing stars. Steady laughs and clapping baffled the four kids. They had instantly gained reputations as writers and creators. "Yeah," I heard Jake say as they packed up, "it's not like you just point the camera around, man. You gotta know what you're doing. You gotta write it."

Two years earlier, asking any of these guys to write was agonizing; they just wouldn't put the words down. Conscious of their struggle to succeed as writers, they often gave up, refusing to take on the status of incompetent. Their rebellion came in what was their most powerful response, an outright refusal to be seen as unsuccessful. They went down with an F or scraped through with a D, maybe not so much feeling the sting of failure, but the satisfaction that comes from knowing you've protected your dignity.

Three weeks into our senior English class, Jerry followed the script he helped write as he sped his rusting Impala toward the fateful crosswalk while Jake and the rest of the crew filmed from different angles. As I watched from a hallway window, a colleague shook his head. "You trust those guys with that equipment?"

Beyond the entertainment value and even multimedia possibilities of teaching writing with technology, my students are willing to dig deep as writers when they are empowered with tools to make the work genuine. That sense of validity, of respect, and the willingness to work at crafting words doubles when students see my respect by ensuring their access to the technology they need to get the job done well, even when it has meant providing them with some of my own gear. When I think back at my colleague's question, I remember that we were talking about guys who found little of value in school for them and were rarely offered much that would make a difference in their lives. In return for my show of respect, I usually found the same returned.

The Power to Publish

The digital classroom isn't necessarily one with racks of video gear in the corner or carts of laptops. Technology motivates students in part by enabling them to present their voices to the real world. We've all given those writing assignments, assigned a grade, written a few kind words and some practical suggestions, just to watch the writing discarded. Did the sentiments ever matter, either theirs or ours? Giving students a portal to the outside world seemed to change that idea that writing doesn't matter.

The benefits of infusing my classroom with technology became clear as a journalism class I developed evolved from a traditional to digital mode. Because they wrote for a public audience, my journalism students often took extra care with their writing. But for many students, the process from story idea to publication was one that was devoid of power and responsibility. Typos or convoluted sentences didn't seem to matter so much in an article for *The Mango*, our print newspaper that was circulated through school and the community. Writers knew the editors would catch their error, editors knew I'd catch their blunders, and I'd hear offhandedly about the ones that saw print. Even our online edition of *The Mango* failed to develop that sense of ownership that I was hoping would prompt my students to write their best. Their writing had not only to get through the editors and me, but now would be held up from publication until the school system's webmaster updated the pages. The system was designed as a series of checks and balances, but also worked as a hierarchy of power and privilege, and when writers do not retain ownership of their words, their sense of commitment and responsibility dwindles as well.

In 2005 my students started "RamblerBlog" at Blogger.com, and student writers in my journalism program had direct access to their readers through a weblog, an easily updateable website that gives its members the power to electronically publish. Students became the authors of the weblog, and I set few guidelines. Nearly any topic was fair game. We reviewed the federal laws surrounding Internet use and schools; and we talked about Internet predation, identity theft, and all the reasons why we couldn't use full names, and why I had disabled the ability of readers to contact writers directly. I told them that real-world access came with a responsibility, both on their part and mine. They would have

direct access to post their writing without prior approval by me or our administration. We set up an editing system, but writers retained final control over their published work. My dozen or so students and I talked daily about what they were writing, and collectively we brainstormed ideas and solutions. Our ninety-minute class ran as a nonstop writer's conference, and the conversations about writing and life have never been richer. And when students decided their story was ready, they hit the Publish button, and their work was online and on the screens of readers.

Here's a glimpse at some of the first year's headlines:

- "Where Are You Going?" – The annual narrative of graduates and their destinations.
- "What's in Your Wallet?" – Get ten people to show the contents of their wallet. You never know what's coming.
- "PDA" – Not the technology, but the trouble with Public Displays of Affection.
- "Commitment" – One student strives for a martial arts black belt.
- "I'm the Master of Low Expectations" – A review of malapropisms posted on a teacher's door.
- "The Boy Called Skinny" – A profile of an amiable, slender senior.

The topics were self-selected, though weekly brainstorming sessions usually generated far more potential stories than we could cover. We weren't looking to be the definitive voice of news and opinion for the Winthrop community, but rather a collection of voices. Looking back over the site, that's just what came of the project. Students got a chance to try out their own voices, and after a supportive technology lab director surreptitiously set every computer's homepage to "RamblerBlog," the feedback was fast and steady.

Students wrote with the understanding that I was no longer their audience—I was just one small part of a readership that might pass their entry by altogether or linger over every word. That idea made our constant conversations on writing more meaningful to some of my students. Turning it in wasn't good enough anymore. Their work was going out with their name, and that matters for most teenagers.

Not every writer, however, was ready for publication. The class blended special education students with seniors who would graduate at the top of their class. I had trained several proficient bloggers as writing coaches—part diplomat and ego booster, part grammarian and sentence constructor—and their help was freely offered and usually gladly accepted. With the bulk of my students working so independently, I was free to pull up a chair and spend twenty minutes by the side of a struggling writer, time all too often missing from a day at school.

Giving my students control of their own public voice as writers does not come without risks. Anyone who has walked through the corridors of a public high school is cognizant of the fact that not every word from a teenager's mouth or keystroke is a gentle one. But students understood that the same rules of polite behavior and appropriate language that I enforced in my classroom were active on our portals to the world as well. Part of the solution comes in creating the kind of classroom atmosphere that values respect, honesty, and trust. And as a backup, I scanned for the latest postings before school started, at lunch, and sometimes as I graded papers in the evening. Just in case.

Publications don't just happen in the traditional sense of magazines and newspapers. Students in one traditional English class came up with an idea to use the young adult novels they were reading as the basis for a calendar focusing on teen issues. After several suicides over the course of a year traumatized our student community, one of my sophomore classes lobbied for several grants and created a calendar on teen issues that they distributed throughout our town. The project transformed the classroom from a teacher- and curriculum-centered model to one that centered on writing and communicating through a service-learning project. Students mixed a focus on curriculum, a laudable goal of trying to assist peers in trouble, and a heavy use of technology. The calendar, "Help Teens Survive," drew involvement from local counselors, police, state agencies, and community leaders and left students with the feeling they had accomplished something meaningful in English class. That reminder stayed with them as they turned the pages over the course of the year.

California Dreaming

Weblogs provide a means for students to write for a genuine audience and receive something any writer treasures: response. They provide a space for students to use the Web at its next level, as contributors, rather than merely users of information. The Maine Learning Technology Initiative has put computers in the hands of every seventh and eighth grader since 2002, but many of my students had just used the machines as tools for information retrieval rather than creation. A pilot weblog project between fifty of my students and thirty juniors at San Francisco's Galileo Academy of Science and Technology helped students become creators of conversations as we brought the writing out of our classrooms, and into a digital hallway that linked diverse cultures and gave a purpose to the word crafting we did in school.

Sponsored by the National Writing Project, The Maine to California Connection offered a secure, password-protected space where my classroom connected to that of Joel Arquillos, then a social studies teacher at Galileo. Our students inhabited an Internet zone where the conversations that took place in my own hallways developed with teens my students would never meet. Few of my students, who hail from a state that has ninety-six percent Caucasian residents, have met an immigrant to the United States. Nearly all of my students speak only English, and many of them live in typical middle-class homes. The Maine to California Connection gave them the chance to write with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who described the challenges and excitement of city life, everything from crossing paths with drug dealers to the latest Giants game. They wrote with teens like Ken, who described the Golden Gate City at night:

I saw a nice, beautiful, full, round moon that flashed the bay. When I turn my head left, I saw the beautiful buildings in downtown. Those buildings are bright and beautiful. San Francisco at nighttime is beautiful when there's no fog around the sky. When you look up at the sky, you could actually see the stars.

This was a new world for my students and these California youth, many first generation Americans, who were mystified by my students' days off because of a sudden snowstorm, or by stories about the deer that narrowly escaped opening day of hunting season. In one

of my handouts to students as we started the blog, I gave them my underlying reason for moving what had typically been a notebook journaling requirement into the weblog forum:

Why this Blog?

The blog started, in a way, out of a frustration; many of you were writing incredible journal entries, yet had no format for sharing those thoughts, whether you wanted to, or thought about that, or not. I'm not talking about the personal stuff. I'm talking about what you think when you walk through the forest, when a friend dies, when a friend goes off to war, when you face one of those decisions you so often face. Or the happy stuff that we need more of—the birth of a foal, the marriage of a sibling, the grade you thought you'd never get but somehow pulled off. How frustrating to see all this writing purely in the isolation of marble-covered journals.

My students knew I respected their words—they saw it in my steady responses to their writing. And as I sought to move their writing to a more open forum, I wondered whether they would revolt. My fears were instantly put aside, though. The project in its first year was a huge success, and my students, mostly sophomores through seniors, posted through the school year, trading stories of major life experiences or thoughts on the latest Napoleon Dynamite look-alike. They shared the news of the weird, like Rosie's post about the New Hampshire boy charged with digging up a corpse.

So creepy and wrong!

Okay, I was listening to the radio yesterday at like 5:30 AM. And they were doing their little news bit. Not like actual news but news that's weird or funny. But this time it kind of made me want to puke. A seventeen-year-old boy from New Hampshire dug up someone's grave and stole the skull! How sick is that??! And guess why he did this? This is the sickest part... He wanted to make a BONG! Out of a HUMAN SKULL! There is something wrong with this kid.

Often the writing was the loose, free chat of teenagers. But sometimes the issues became serious. Carla, a senior who needed only my class to graduate, left our town to escape an abusive relationship and moved to her mother's small coastal town. She joined our conversation, reconnected with friends, and earned her English credit, all through her coastal town library's Internet connection and our weblog. Her post, "Important Decision... and I need help," set off my teaching alarm bells, and immediately had her surrounded by concerned weblogging friends from our classroom and caring adults. Her question was the kind that reminds me of the weight teenagers sometimes bear: "Do I tell my brother that our father is dying?"

Derek, my teen-angst poet, made the weblog his homepage, and wrote steadily, letting loose bursts of poetry rich with the imagery of 50 Cent and Eminem, but without the vulgarity, one of the few rules I enforced on the blog. But as students began posting in greater number, I privately questioned the validity of my students' writing in this semipublic forum and issued a new directive to my students: lose the slang, the IM-speak, the email-ese. Clean up the language.

The weblog was just one component of the writing my students undertook; formal papers, letters, and research components in multigenre formats rounded out our work. But what concerned me was the apparent lackadaisical approach many students took toward what they posted. Derek's thoughts on love might have contained a dozen typos and at times other used the instant message slang that many used with great fluidity, a

bridge sometimes between their language and my own. Many of my students saw no need to change.

Derek's rap, "Super Saucy Saucyy" was one of those pieces that left me wondering what I had started when I first began the weblog.

Come with me an' start a new life
Possibly be my wife, who's to know, if we take it slow, how far we'll go.
But if ya ever want to know, give it a chance, let's dance
To the beat, we be rockin' the heat, neva take a seat

So I acted. I issued the "proper English" rule: the slang had to stop, the writing needed to be as refined as any other formal English we wrote in school. I wasn't expecting King's English, but the casualness of my students' writing had to end. But I had momentarily forgotten that Derek was one of those boys who traditionally had not written for English class, but wrote prolifically on his own. Was it fear that my colleagues would see my students writing as inappropriate? Probably. Chalk it up to uncertainty of that ongoing argument over whether technology was helping my students write better, or sanctioning their slide into a flaunting of grammatical rules and a degradation of the English language. What I was soon to realize was that it didn't matter. My students had been writing.

The new dictate I issued changed that. Suddenly it was as if Derek had gone on strike; immediately, his writing ground to a halt, and I had little idea why. But I noticed something had grown seriously wrong in our budding community of writers when I read Brandon's reply to Mayra's poem, a piece that loosely experimented with creative spelling like "realli" for "really" and playfully changed zeroes for the letter o to create a visual, as well as meaningful, statement about a broken relationship. It seemed as if he never noticed the sense of loss the writer exhibited, the mental anguish of a lost love, or the hope at a new start.

Hey, Mayra A nice poem... I am tempted to say that the coolest thing about that poem was the fact that you used "i"s instead of "y"s. But they say we have to write all formal and non-email talk.

Struck by the potential harshness of his response, I immediately waived the proper English rule, and my student writers actively began posting again. Later on, Derek told me why he valued writing on the weblog when he often disliked writing traditional school assignments:

You don't have your teacher telling you that this is the correct punctuation or this is the right way your sentence structure needs to be. It's written as you feel it should be written. If you want to use slang or something, you put it in there. I mean, you can't tell somebody how to write. They write the way they do, and on the blog, you can do that. You write the way you do.

I still wonder at Derek's thought, that "you can't tell somebody how to write." Many writing teachers would disagree, and at times, I do as well. But Derek wasn't talking about the formal writing that develops a first impression with a new employer, or persuades an opponent to cross sides in an argument. His highly revised, formal writing produced a serious, reflective college essay, as well as an A grade in my course. The weblog, though, was often the place where he put his thoughts together and tried out his ideas, a space where he wrote the way he wanted to. And finally he wanted to write.

Weblogs offer possibilities for links like our cross-country project. But other possibilities make starting easier. The free program Moodle (<http://moodle.org>) provides weblog software suitable for fully online classes or the traditional class with an occasional interac-

tive component. Its security features keep students safe, and hosting the software on a school computer makes it part of the school's infrastructure, easing parental concern over Internet postings. Edublogs (<http://edublogs.org>) provides free, fast blogspace for educators, and its branch, LearnerBlogs (<http://learnerblogs.org>) offers the same for students.

Consider some of the possibilities:

- Students share writing in progress, and peers respond with suggestions for revision.
- Book conversations develop an online component with links to author websites, connections to related topics, or questions for extending thinking.
- A weblog becomes a digital portfolio and students have the opportunity to view their peers' blogs through shared postings.
- Class weblogs host student-generated audio files, video clips, and still photos as writing responses.
- Guest writers—authors, politicians, business leaders, sports figures—are recruited to join the classroom conversation through a weblog.
- Texts are shared beyond classrooms; students in Cambodia and Maine share thoughts on a survivor's story of the Khmer Rouge genocide; teens in urban New Jersey and rural Maine trade perspectives on a novel.
- Parents view a teacher weblog to view homework assignments, or students out of school for a day download the material distributed in class.

The Maine to California Connection lasted a second year and expanded slightly, then faded as the teachers involved changed jobs, took on other projects, and lost those moments of collaborative conversation needed to manage a project like this. Future exchanges will continue to emerge for my Maine students, and as I consider the possibilities, I always remember Derek's words of enthusiasm for his writing in the digital forum of our weblog. "It's like, 'Wow. Somebody else actually out there is feeling the same way I am. I'm not the only person on this planet that is feeling this way.'"

Telling Our Stories

It's an early spring morning, and my class of twenty-three freshmen at Messalonskee High School in Oakland, Maine, is in chaos. A third of the students have an arm raised, and periodically someone moans, "Mr. Boardman...I don't know what to do..." I suggest they try their help menus and ask each other for the technical answers. The hands drop for the moment. At least one student stares at her screen with a look of horror, as though her laptop just froze and she forgot to save. I toss out another friendly, "Make sure you're saving your work" admonition, and wince for the girl who just mutters, "Yeah, no kidding." Down the hall, one girl sits in the English department's cramped book closet, reading her essay into my MP3 recorder. Two others are in another wing—a teacher friend has offered her room as a recording studio. A boy is scribbling his latest revision into his notebook and already has my iPod to record his narration. It's chaos, but students are creating digital stories and writing with an intensity that they've never had before.

Just as students find my classroom a place where they have the power to present their own words to the world around them, they also discover that a multimedia approach to writing can be far more engaging, and much more demanding, than traditional essay writing. The concept: students write about one of two topics, describing either a place that holds special meaning for them or something they have learned, and explore how that has changed them. They then scour family albums, magazines, or even several royalty-free photographic websites for images that relate, either explicitly or symbolically. After revising their writing until the piece flows, they record their own narration and use Microsoft's Movie Maker and Photo Story 3 to piece together a coordinated montage of voice, background music, and images.

With a cart of twenty-five laptops in my classroom, high-speed wireless, and a skilled technology integration team ready to help, the project seemed an easily manageable one, something that I knew my students would latch onto. But when I started, I wasn't certain how blending pictures, music, and narration would help writers. My students made the answers clear.

Brenda, a fifteen-year-old freshman in a class for struggling readers, wrote her digital story on the first time her dad took her on his tow truck to help a stranded motorist. After revising her piece, "The Call," four times, she began reading her narrative aloud, only to discover the words she was glossing over as a silent reader now stumbled her as a speaker. Like other students, Brenda quickly discovered the reason behind revision, something I had tried to show students for months. As I coached Brenda on several initial drafts, I sensed her resistance to suggested changes starting to grow. My ideas as a writer and editor were beginning to impinge on her ownership of her own work. In any other project, the revision would have ended and we'd move on to another assignment. But when my suggestions for revising ended and Brenda began to feel and hear her own halting reading of the story, she went back to her drafts, smoothed the rough spots or the areas where the meaning seemed convoluted, and tried again. It was just the kind of independent revision I'd been seeking from students with little success.

The technology seemed daunting at first—scanners, digital cameras, audio equipment, laptops, and several different programs at once—multiplied by twenty-plus students. But I always found several students in each class who knew their way around the basics, and resources through a National Writing Project grant connected us with technical support. Establishing a set of guidelines also helped keep students from rushing through the process. A few of the ones I relied on included:

- Starting off with a long, 800–1000 word essay that was revised several times, then trimmed back to the 350-word digital story narrative. Students wound up with narratives that were tightly focused and already well-revised.
- Banning right-clicking of Internet images, except from royalty-free websites that offered free photo downloads.
- Encouraging students to use magazine photos, notes, symbolic images, and self-produced music to for their projects.
- Providing several inexpensive digital cameras as loaners so all students had access to equipment.
- Helping students develop a genuine venue to showcase their finished work. A district technology night gave them a perfect chance to demonstrate their skills.

Between help menus, student experts, and support staff glad to see technology in use, the problems that halt any technology project were easily overcome. Models for students to view before the project starts are easily available on the Internet, and some, especially from online sites like the BBC's "Capture Wales Digital Storytelling" project in Wales, provide approachable and hugely entertaining examples that hone students' critical visual literacy skills as well. Just use your favorite search engine to identify sites. Overall, most students spent close to twenty hours on their digital stories in addition to outside writing time, but the commitment was worth the investment.

"I learned a lot about making voices flow with words and how to really crack down and revise a piece of writing that I've written," one student wrote in his reflection on the project.

In revising the piece after reading it aloud, I learned that in order to avoid stumbling while recording, I had to change the wording of certain things...I finally figured out that even in reading in order for it to sound right the paper needed dramatic pauses and rhythm.

The realization of my students was widespread and just what I was hoping for.

The digital classroom offers unlimited, transformational possibilities. Students explore another culture by writing to peers across the country or around the world; they visit an online writing center and check their sentence-crafting skills; or they devise a way to save a life. They share thoughts about an author's intentions by collaborating in an online forum, and they talk in the digital hallways while I linger on the edge, sometimes eavesdropping on the learning, other times guiding the conversation. There's a lot going on, and from year to year, something else offers a glimmer of promise, one more tactic in helping one more writer. Technology adds volume to our conversations, and our digital classroom is helping students discover a more resonant voice on their way to becoming proficient, independent learners.