Connections Beyond the Classroom – The Promise of Web Authoring Tools

SUMMARY

Web authoring tools are one of the most useful products of the new digital technologies known as Web 2.0. Find out how these user-friendly, interactive tools can be used to engage students more actively in reading and writing.

Today's students are living in a multimedia world that increasingly requires use of new digital technologies. These new technologies, often called Web 2.0 tools, are characterized by their interactivity and user-friendliness and can assist students in learning to read, write, and think critically about the world (Freeman, Freeman & Ramirez, 2008; Newkirk & Kent, 2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2008). These technologies are highly engaging and motivating for students and teachers alike, and they represent new digital literacies needed for success (Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009).

Web authoring tools are a particular kind of Web 2.0 technology which have tremendous potential for teachers and their students. The term "Web authoring tools" refers to a range of software programs that can be used to create content that can be viewed on the Internet. In this article, we examine Web authoring tools and describe how such tools can be used to improve our educational programs in a variety of ways.

What Research Tells Us

The connection between literacy and technology is increasingly important. Recent research (Leu, McVerry, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, Castek, & Hartman, 2009) indicates that students are now reading and writing as much, or even more, electronically than with conventional texts. A child's world is filled with digital information and messages (Johnson, Levine & Smith, 2009) requiring use of increasingly

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complex reading and writing skills and strategies (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Leu et al., 2007; Walker, Bean & Dillard, 2010). These new technologies use a variety of textual, visual, audio, and graphic formats for composing, and we believe that all children must learn to use them well to be fully literate in today's digital world.

A consistent research finding (O'Brien, Beach, & Scharber, 2007; Tarasiuk, 2010), supported by our own observations working with students, indicates that the new technologies produce sustained engagement with reading and writing. Teachers know it can be difficult to actively engage students in learning, but we have found this challenge often evaporates when using the new technologies. Our experience shows that regardless of grade level or whether we are teaching in rural, suburban, or urban settings, children find digital literacies engaging. Students consistently want to learn and are eager to use these new technologies in their reading and writing. Research indicates that student engagement is directly associated with academic achievement, and these new technologies offer wonderful opportunities for capitalizing on students'

interest in using them (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Wigfield et al., 2008).

Students enjoy having choice in what they read and write. New technologies encourage students to insert movies, digital games, photographs and countless other items ranging from images of comic figures to videos of hip-hop celebrities into their online work. Choice helps students develop voice and ownership in their work, and it is widely associated with reading and writing achievement (Allington, 2006; Atwell, 1998; Daniels, 2002; Johnson & Blair, 2003).

Web Authoring Tools

Web authoring tools provide users with an efficient and relatively easy way to construct their own websites. Web authoring tools are similar to word processing programs as they allow users to choose from a variety of windows for composing, editing, and formatting their texts. Users construct their websites by selecting templates for design and layout, and using toolbars for composing text, adding graphics, images, photos, and other media. We

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An advantage of a teacher-developed website is that it can be easily tailored to fit the specific needs of each classroom and it does not require the expertise and time of a webmaster.

have discovered positive effects from using such tools in our teaching in both rural and urban settings. These include improving communication with families and communities, supporting and enhancing students' learning in the content areas, providing authentic and engaging reasons for integrating the new literacies into classroom learning, showcasing students' work, and helping them connect with the world.

Improving Communication with Families and Community

Two years ago Debbie Dermady began a classroom website for her fifth-graders and found it encourages parent participation and improves their support of children's learning. She writes and posts weekly D-blasts ("Dermady Newsletters") and sends hard copies to the few families without Internet service. Families can access her website to obtain classroom materials, descriptions of weekly assignments, classroom schedules and rules, examples of students' work, ideas for supporting students' learning, as well as many other kinds of information that are important for today's students. An advantage of a teacher-developed website is that it can be easily tailored to fit the specific needs of each classroom and it does not require the expertise and time of a webmaster. Figure 1 presents a screen capture of Debbie's website.

Supporting Learning in the Content Areas

Debbie's classroom site contains many links to other websites for supporting student learning. For example, the social studies subsection of her website contains links to *National Geographic*, American Civil War sites, websites about music of World War I, and links to public broadcasting's resources about the Great Dust Bowl, among others. Children and their families use her website's hyperlinks to click to each subject area for supporting and enriching subject area learning.

Providing Authentic Reasons for Using the New Literacies

Real examples of reading and writing in everyday life are provided on the site. Videos and podcasts of authors reading their work and interviews of authors discussing their writing give students a sense that real people write books and draw on their own life experiences. There are many examples of students' completed work posted on the website. Her students, for example, create comics that illustrate subject area vocabulary using Animoto, and these are posted on the classroom website. Students write book reviews that are posted to her site and sometimes submitted to publishers' websites (e.g., *Scholastic*). She teaches her students to use Web 2.0 tools in appropriate ways, and she reinforces the idea that if students abuse the

Figure 1: Debbie's classroom website

Welcome to Mrs. Dermady's Fifth Grade Class!
Room 217-Guardino Elementary

Home Page

Our School Book Fair Has Begun!

NEW! Scholastic Book Club Online Ordering

There's No Place Like...HOME!

"STAR" FISH of the Week!

Emails or Monthly D-Blasts

New Halloween Video!

Kalli Dakos is coming to Visit!-Author Spotlight

Nov/Dec NIE Happenings 2010!

PBWikis-Check out our new Cape Cod Epals!

What are the KIDS and some of their TEACHERS up to now?

Monthly Happenings

Classroom Handouts-School Supply List, Summer Writing Mission and More!

New 2010 Schedule & Rules

Check out some of these COOL Websites!

Upper Canada Village 2010

Hello to our Cape Cod E-Pals...

Falmouth, MA

from the 1000 Islands!

Clayton, NY

classroom_rules_2010.doc
Download File

2010schedule-dermadyschedule.xls
Download File

xtranormal.com

Check out our Classroom Rules in this video! Just press play to view!

technology (e.g., use inappropriate language) they will lose the right to use them in school.

A popular Web authoring tool is Weebly. *Time* magazine named it one of the 50 Best Websites in 2007 (*Time*, 2007). We find it easy to learn and use because it incorporates drop-and-drag features, requires no knowledge of HTML (a mark-up language for websites), contains pre-made designs and incorporates several positive features, including blogging and

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options for embedding other Web 2.0 tools (e.g., podcasts, videos and screencasts). Weebly has no limits on number of pages and storage, and it does not post commercial advertisements on users' websites. Students often choose to show photographs of their favorite foods, sports, animals, singers, movies, and TV shows.

Many students we have worked with share their websites with their classroom teachers, their families, and building principal. Such website use validates students' life experiences, and this may be especially important for children and youth for whom the home-school connection needs strengthening.

Showcasing Students' Work

Debbie often embeds students' digital projects into the website. Last year, for example, she instituted a Veterans Project whereby students interviewed military veterans, developed PowerPoint slides, and presented them in the classroom. The website captured that learning experience with essays, photographs, and videos of the students interacting with veterans and traveling with them on the St. Lawrence River.

Students enjoy incorporating photography and video on their websites. Flip cameras are easy to use (point and shoot), inexpensive and generate

high-definition film that is easily edited. Mike, a new teacher we have worked with in an urban district, requires his students to create glogs (e.g., Glogster) in which voice, typing, photography and video are integrated into electronic posters.

Helping Students Connect with the World

In Debbie's rural school there is little ethnic diversity, so last year she collaborated with a former student who was student teaching in Ghana. As a result, Debbie's students were able to connect with students in a school in Ghana. Her students have corresponded with their new African friends and have learned about each other's country and community.

Considerations Related to Web Authoring

Web authoring can easily be done through classroom computers if Internet access is available. There is often no financial cost to the school district due to an abundance of free Web authoring options and shareware tools to make websites interactive and engaging. The amount of choice regarding what is included and how active students are in developing websites is very age- and teacher-dependent.

Suggestions for Getting Started with Web Authoring

Web authoring can be completed as a class, in small groups or individually. We have a few suggestions for beginning Web authoring with learners.

- After-school clubs can be a starting point because they allow the students to build capacity, such that technology experts emerge among peers. Our experience is that student enthusiasm and interest are contagious once a core group becomes involved with Web authoring.

- Student groups can be given choice of different activities in the content areas which require the development of materials (e.g., students develop multimedia weekly summaries from their content area studies and upload to websites with teacher guidance).

- As students progress through school, they can be encouraged to create online websites that serve as repositories of their work. For example, students might select from among their materials for e-portfolios to document their individual achievements. High school students may decide to display their group work and individual creative works on websites, within parameters for acceptable language usage and given direction from rubrics.

With all of the emerging Web 2.0 tools, teachers need to be aware of district and school policies, including those on acceptable use of language and photos, and have a clear understanding of them. Students and parents should also agree to them in writing. Teachers need to be aware of policies regarding student use or sharing of personal information with any websites.

Final Thoughts

The new technologies are a contemporary literacy issue (Leu et al., 2009) that represents how reading and writing are used in everyday life. Digital literacy is interactive, collaborative and connective. The new digital literacies (Spence, 2009) and Web authoring tools offer authentic opportunities for engaging students in meaningful learning. The use of these new technologies will improve students' ability to read, write, and advance in each of the content areas — leading to greater success in today's world.

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Web 2.0 Tools and Websites

Animoto (http://animoto.com/)

Lets users quickly create multimedia presentations using their favorite photographs and music selections.

Flip Camera (http://www.theflip.com)

Inexpensive point-and-shoot video camera that captures easily editable, high-density film. Can also be used as a digital camera.

Glogster (http://www.glogster.com/)

Users can create colorful online posters in which texts, photos, images, podcasts and vodcasts can be embedded.

Scholastic (http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/swyar/)

Students can post their own reviews of favorite books on this website published by *Scholastic*.

Weebly (http://education.weebly.com/)

This Web authoring site allows users to select and drag from various formats to create their own Web pages.