

## **Digital Writing: How I Learned How to Stop Worrying and Love the Blog**

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### **Overview**

In the midst of a 1:1 technology initiative, the Appoquinimink School District has changed everything about what it means to be a 9th grade English teacher. Our district has embraced the philosophy that technology empowers students and makes learning increasingly more engaging and efficient. As teachers, we knew this would have great implications on the way that we deliver content, collect and assess student work, and design our instruction. I was an “early adopter” of technology in my classroom; I could not wait to get devices in the hands of my students so that we could work collaboratively on shared documents and play competitive online review games as a class. My instructional strategies began to shift over time and not surprisingly, the content of my teaching began to look less and less familiar. I was assigning fewer essays, but teaching a dozen additional writing skills. We visited the library less, but conducted far more research than ever before. I wouldn’t say that technology solved my problems; it sure added new challenges of its own. Somehow technology was rewriting how I taught ELA; and its greatest impact was on the way my students and I experienced writing. Digital writing tasks required a new skill-set from my students and it made teaching writing more enjoyable for my class and me. For the first time in 6 years, I didn’t bring a heap of essays home with me over the holidays, I sat on the couch with my laptop and scrolled through student-designed websites that boasted some of the most intriguing writing I’ve ever read.

For years, I have developed and taught curricula that focused on students as consumers of texts, but rarely have my students participated in creating texts outside of the literary analysis or persuasive essay. With the help and guidance from our technology coaches, I was inspired by emerging technologies to abandon the formulaic 5-paragraph essay for more real-life formats and styles published in online platforms. My writing assignments now require multimedia formats as part of the structure that supports student ideas and experiences. Although technology affords valuable tools that make the act of writing simple and streamlined, devices can sometimes pose new challenges. Inevitably students face the occasional difficulty with using their newly provided Chromebooks, whether that means technical difficulties or even writer’s block. However, the setbacks have been worth the time it has taken us to learn how to troubleshoot and problem solve. This unit aims to address these concerns while also focusing primarily on how students can use 21st century tools to publish genuine writing pieces for authentic audiences.

Students will use technology to showcase a range of digital writing skills in a capstone portfolio project at the end of the unit.

## **Background**

Appoquinimink school district is situated in Odessa Delaware and has 16 schools that serves students from grades K-12. I work at Middletown High School, one of the two secondary schools in the district. The 9th-12th grade student population is nearly 1500 and enrollment is growing each year.

This year, I will be teaching 6 sections of 9th grade ELA with a range of college-prep, honors, and inclusion settings. My class size fluctuates between 25-35 students from a variety of backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. I am paired with an inclusion teacher that has background as a reading specialist to help me assist students with reading challenges.

After the first two weeks of school, 9th and 10th graders received a district provided Chromebook for use in the classroom and at home. Appoquinimink school district's rationale was to provide each student with their own device so that teachers could utilize technology in their lessons and assignments. The district not only provided each student with their own device, but has supported teachers by offering numerous professional development opportunities that have established a framework for how technology can help educators meet learning objectives. Luckily, our district provides teachers with the autonomy to utilize technologies and applications most appropriate for the unique teaching style of each individual teacher.

During the year that I piloted this program, I experienced the learning curve that comes with using new tools. I ambitiously designed technology-infused lessons, filmed video tutorials of instruction, and created every matter of online assignment imaginable. But there were days when my lofty plans were hindered by network connectivity issues, or I had overestimated my students' technological skills. I experimented with online technologies and learned how to accept the inevitable setback or failure as par for the course.

When the devices and network worked reliably, I took careful note the tools and approaches that worked best. By the end of the pilot, I had observed that these devices had their greatest educational impact on the course's writing instruction. In particular, the online landscape provided greater opportunities for my students to explore writing genres that exist outside of essay writing. Since the technology afforded us a streamlined and efficient writing platform, we were able to explore narrative and non-fiction writing using multiple modes and formats. This new writing landscape provided exciting new features and challenges that made reading and writing more engaging for students and myself. By the end of the year, we had exceeded our writing objectives

and produced a variety of visual and creative texts that students were very proud of. The only thing that would have made our experience better would have been a place for us to display our work. Therefore, after my initial experience with teaching digital texts, I decided that I would revise our previous writing unit to include a digital writing portfolio that would collect and display their semester's worth of writing into one coherent project.

After exploring a few options, students voted on using Google Sites as the tool that we would use to publish all of our digital texts since it can house a variety of mediums (hyperlinks, images, video, google docs, etc.) and was easily customized to display the style and voice of student authors. We used this digital portfolio to house their work, but also used it as a means to reflect on the progression of their writing skills throughout the course.

## **Rationale**

Having taught 9th grade English Language Arts for 6 years, I have experienced my fair share of student essays. They are often formulaic, dull, and often lack the depth of understanding I hope to see from my students. However, I have noticed that students excel during creative, unstructured writing assignments and I hope that this unit will prove that nonfiction writing can be a more purposeful task if technology is used strategically to incorporate novel features into student writing.

Given that devices increase engagement, I aim to use entirely web-based tools to scaffold the learning tasks for this unit. Students will progress throughout the unit at a pace that is appropriate for their own skills and prior knowledge.

By the conclusion of the unit, students will have produced a Google site that acts as a digital portfolio. Within this portfolio, students will house a few informal blog posts, one explanatory text using Smore.com, two mentor texts with an explanation of how they influenced the author's writing, and finally, a reflection on how they have grown as a writer.

Throughout the unit, students will encourage and coach their peers through editing and revision activities. But the goal is not to **perfect** their writing<sup>1</sup>; the primary objective will be to take steps to further the readership of their texts; thinking always of their reader will mean that students make critical decisions about the construction and clarity of their writing (something that does not occur when students write research essays!). This portfolio project will hopefully engage students through the writing process and build lifelong confidence that each student is not only a reader, but an author.

## **Content Objectives**

Throughout the course of this unit, students will be introduced to a variety of techniques and strategies that will help them navigate their devices, construct digital texts, and troubleshoot when problems arise. The writing activities will engage students in conversations and tasks surrounding how to critically read, analyze, and produce multimedia texts. Students will routinely write blog posts, provide peer feedback, reflect on the writing process, and ultimately publish their final products on a Google Site.

Currently the ELA narrative unit is a behemoth; it runs at least a month long and covers similar concepts across multiple texts. After reading our longest narrative, *Of Mice and Men*, students are expected to demonstrate their narrative knowledge by constructing a real or imagined narrative. In the past, the 9th grade team has attempted to break the task of narrative writing into individual assignments that isolate specific concepts. For example, students read the opening to Steinbeck's novel and re-imagine his sentence structure for a different location. This brief and informal exercise has always worked magnificently. The issue arises when the expectation changed and students are were then asked to write one extended and coherent narrative. This is when the cookie crumbles. Students lack the endurance and attention to detail required of narrative writing; they simply don't have the practice with creating the structure for their own stories.

I have also witnessed that students encounter roadblocks that they have created for themselves. Most notably, student writers want constant positive feedback and rigid structure so that they can feel confident that they are getting the right answer. Writing doesn't work this way; experienced writers eventually come to accept the writing process as an ebb and flow of productivity and revision rather than a means of evaluation. One of the feature activities in this unit aims to redefine how students see the writing process. By encouraging students to write daily informal blog posts teachers can cultivate writing as a form of creative outlet rather than an opportunity for assessment.

Increasingly, websites, software, and applications enable users to curate and house multimedia text on free platforms. These digital writing platforms result in perhaps the most significant shifts in student writing because the conventions of the genre demand new approaches and skills. Take for example blogging and microblogging; the format of a blog might vary slightly between authors, but the underlying conventions of the genre include a major emphasis on visual media to support text. Page layout and organizational structure are key features to the genre and engage students in interesting problems to solve. Not to mention, blogging enables students to write for purposes and audiences that matter most to them which foster opportunities for student authors to hone their voice and style. Designing a blog and producing its content allows students to experiment with making their own choices regarding not only the text's features (point of view, sentence structure, organization), but the visual format of the page itself (sidebars, navigational features, embedded content, etc.) Experience has shown that when students have more autonomy over these choices, they become increasingly more invested in the quality and readership of their writing.

## Why the Need for Digital Writing Instruction?

Without a doubt, reading digital texts is a significant contributor to our modern sense of literacy, but what does this mean for the instruction of reading and writing? I would venture so far as to argue that digital texts should comprise as much equity of our literacy instruction as print text. Digital texts such as websites, ebooks, blogs, wikis, and discussion forums utilize an equivalent set of reading skills as print texts; but also requires readers to engage in questions surrounding accuracy and credibility.

In a world where digital texts are becoming more predominant, it is only logical that instruction matches the skill-set required to consume these texts. If ELA teachers are adequately preparing students to be college and career ready, we ought to immerse students in as many kinds of multimedia as they might encounter in the “real world”.

Kathy Mills and Amanda Levido experimented with curriculum writing that aimed to reach this goal of equipping students with digital writing skills. They argue that as instructors of writing, we must understand that “emerging communications technologies generate new forms of textual production that require new pedagogies in literacy classrooms.”<sup>iii</sup> Their article *iPed; Pedagogy for digital text production* provides a framework for how teachers might envision the shift from an early adoption of technical writing to a curriculum that facilitates the production of electronic media that ranges from websites and blogs to documentaries and comics.

In particular, Kathy Mills argues that, “[what] literacy teachers need to know is how to transform the print-based practices that have dominated Western schooling into digital practices that more closely reflect the authentic uses of literacy beyond the classroom”<sup>iii</sup>. Together, these teachers designed an iPed framework that would cultivate a community of writing through the use of an immersive digital writing curriculum.

This iPed experiment involved 75 students ranging from 8.5-9.5 years old and introduced students to “the features of new digital text types: blog pages, podcasts, micro-documentaries, Web profiles, digital stories, and online comics. Students were also introduced to new meta-languages to describe media texts (e.g., shot types, cutaways, transitions), and technical proficiencies with a suite of media software”<sup>iv</sup>. Other similarly aged students were taught in the same school without the digital tools and were found to have shown less improvement among several writing standards. Kathy and Amanda’s article provided the inspiration for a number of ideas throughout this unit that emphasize the motivation afforded by technology as well as the power of choice and freedom given to students in writing tasks. Perhaps most important is the emphasis on how authentic writing tasks encourage students to produce texts worthy of sharing within their local and global communities.

## Teaching Strategies

## Mentor texts

A major component of learning how to hone writing skills is reading texts from masters of the field. When students engage in critical reading and analysis of texts, they can better internalize and reproduce the techniques they have discerned from model texts. For this reason, the unit will include an emphasis on the gathering and analysis of mentor texts.

Mentor texts are student or teacher selected writing samples that exhibit exemplary writing features that students wish to mimic. Collecting and assessing mentor texts is a valuable skill for students exploring new writing formats. I observed the need for mentor texts after assigning an explanatory writing project for the first time. My students needed to learn more about the final product they were producing so they could get a stronger sense of how to begin drafting. After showing my students a few mentor texts, we discussed the features of our favorite sites and we delved deep into a conversation about how specific formatting or technical decisions that the authors made impacted the way the readers consumed the information on the page. At times, it was even helpful for us to find poor examples of digital explanatory texts so that we could better understand why students should avoid certain features that distracted the reader or made navigating the writing too cumbersome.

In my own classroom, I had students read a Jerry Jenkins' blog titled "How to write an anecdote"<sup>v</sup> and asked students which piece of information from the blog they found most useful to apply to their own work. As a formative assessment, not only did students share how they used the blog's information, but they provided a sample of how this knowledge manifested itself in their first drafts. As a result, I was able to see directly how students were able to translate content and writing strategies from a mentor text to their own work.

When students successfully re-create a new composition skill they learned from a mentor text, they often feel more confident in themselves as a writer. Ruth Culham's "The Writing Thief" outlines a variety of uses for mentor texts. Culham describes how, "We need to be on the same page when we talk about reading so we can get past the surface and discuss the writing and how it works in detail."<sup>vi</sup> I would agree with Culham, that meaningful conversations about how writing 'works' enable students to imagine how each decision they make in the writing process impacts their reader.

## Blogging

In recent years, I've seen a surge in student interest in social media platforms that invite students to follow their closest friends and most adored celebrities. Snapchat and Instagram are perhaps, the most notorious, with Twitter coming in at a close third. I'm intrigued by their interest in Twitter because it's a place where students are exposed to

the “stories” of others within their local community and even branching further outside of Middletown. I want to take their interest in digital texts and expand it to an appropriate format that we can use to display their own creative writing. Sites like WordPress, Medium.com, and Google Sites are online tools that authors can use to publish their digital stories. Many of these sites offer readers the opportunity to comment on the material which keeps the writing relevant and engaging for the author.

The traditional exchange between student writer and audience has been in the form of a student handing an essay to their teacher for the purpose of receiving an evaluation and subsequent grade. With blogs, it doesn't work that way. Authors post their thoughts, ideas, and experiences to a global audience that is (typically) intrinsically motivated to consume the text. Some readers of blogs choose to post questions to the author or respond with their own interpretations and ideas. In other cases, readers confront or challenge the ideas presented in a blog and the comments or replies can open the doors of debate and exchange. These are all exercises in critical thinking and exchange that are not offered from a traditional writing assignment.

I imagine that students might be more selective about their content and more deliberate in their attempts at revision if they were asked to publish their work to an audience outside of just their instructor. Additionally, blog writing presents an opportunity for students to showcase their skills in writing and design. Publishing a blog requires an author to make informed decisions about content, formatting, audience, purpose, and so on. Making blogging a routine in the writing classroom serves to gradually strengthen these skills through extensive practice and revision.

### Hybrid Learning Environment

For a unit centralized around creating digital texts, it only makes sense that some of the content and activities are housed in an electronic medium. Since students will have varying familiarities with creating blogs, it might be helpful to provide a range of instructional videos to get students started. A flipped model would be very useful for the skills and concepts covered in the unit so that students can receive the lessons outside of class for homework, and use classroom time to receive peer/teacher feedback.

Having experimented with a few online lesson types, I believe that the most valuable resources and activities that would benefit students throughout the process of creating a blog would be using audio/video discussion boards for students to pose their questions, findings, and experiences to their classmates. I have found that discussion boards give students autonomy over the content and direction of the discussion which can increase the value gained from collaborative exercises. Additionally, the format of these resources engages students in critical speaking and listening skills that represent a small part of the Common Core Standards that we address throughout the 9th grade curriculum.

Blogging has the potential to help document each student's journey from inexperience to mastery. Over time, students will gain increasing confidence, accumulate additional skills, and publish works that better represent their own voice and style. All of these outcomes have been limited in the traditional format that I've used in the past. Very rarely did I experience students that were excited about sharing or publishing their work. I hope to change that with this shift in medium. To conclude the unit, students will participate in a reflection activity (or discussion board) that exhibits what they have learned throughout the process and how they have faced and surmounted obstacles along the way.

### **Classroom Activities**

#### Peer-Feedback

Peer-editing is a difficult task to make meaningful for students for a variety of reasons. Primarily because it requires that students work hard for outcomes that don't particularly benefit (or interest them for that matter). However, if the expectations are reversed, we can try to make the task equally meaningful for the reader as the writer. Essentially, students should begin to see their peer's work as additional mentor texts that offer valuable insight and inspiration to the reader. The reason why I know this works is because I've witnessed it first-hand. I asked students to take 20 minutes to read each other's writing and to leave only positive feedback. I stressed that this was not a mission of revision; they should read for pleasure and leave polite comments in return. For the first time in my teaching career, my students asked for more time to read each other's work. Since each student used such varying approaches to their layouts and visual media, the readers couldn't get enough of it. They were excited to add new elements to their own projects after seeing the artistic creations of others. Most importantly, this activity facilitated meaningful dialogue about how the author may (or may not) have effectively served their purpose by utilizing particular tools or organizational strategies.

To give this activity more structure, I would recommend modeling with students how to scan mentor texts and analyze the effectiveness of a work's organization, format, use of media, clarity of ideas, and author voice. Providing students with a checklist or a guided reflection handout is even more likely to help students view digital texts with a critical lense and then apply those findings to their own work.

#### Explanatory Writing with Smore.com

I met with a technology coach at the beginning of the school year and asked for his assistance with revising my nonfiction unit. I expressed the challenge of meeting the curriculum requirements while also giving students some creative freedom, or as he calls it, "voice and choice". Jesse's eyes lit up and he said that, without a doubt, a poster making website was the ideal tool. Smore.com is a site dedicated to helping users create a webpage with a poster or flyer layout. I wanted my students to construct an explanatory



text similar to an informative piece or a “how-to”, so I was hesitant to even look at the site. But Jesse was right, Smore.com is a user-friendly platform that handles the complicated task of formatting images and embedding content while writers simply insert their desired content. You can think of it as an extremely simplified Word Press. *Extremely* simplified.

After creating an account, users simply pick a template, a title, and select their chosen media ranging from text, image, video, audio, google form, etc. The page artfully creates a digital landscape for the written word and disguises all of the complicated coding and formatting.

Since the page is so easy to learn how to use, I let my students “play around” with the tool. I did not teach them where or what to click or how to do use the functionality of the tools. They simply experimented with the tool and its responses. This was a very refreshing activity for students because they were very self-motivated to discover the inner-workings of the platform for themselves. And without prompting, they eagerly leaned over each other’s computers and taught each other the exciting functionality of the site. After about a half-hour, we re-grouped and I made sure to review the necessary functions and tools which, for the most part, the students had already figured out.

I provided my students with a very generic rubric and asked them to produce an explanatory text that utilized multiple forms of media to support the content of their writing. They would have to begin their project with an anecdote, (rather than an introduction with a “hook”) provide meaningful conventions of nonfiction texts such as headings, images, captions, etc. and develop an authentic voice or style.

For teachers wanting to do an activity like this with little flexibility in the curriculum, I would recommend having students use a tool such as Smore.com to produce a “visual” text for a writing assignment that they have already written in a previous unit. For example, students who have written a lengthy research paper can copy and paste majority of their content into the site and supplement it with a few added features and media. This will meet multiple learning outcomes without adding the commitment to an additional writing assignment.

### Publishing a Digital Portfolio

The most rewarding stage of the writing process is undoubtedly publishing. After weeks of grueling writing and revision, students look forward to the satisfaction of sharing their finely polished work with the world. Although their digital explanatory text, created through Smore.com, is already online, students can learn a lot about what it requires to collect a variety of texts and organize them together meaningfully in one site.

For students combining content from a multitude of formats, using a webpage is a great tool. Student portfolios can display a biography on the author, a group of inspirational mentor texts, a collection of drafts (or excerpts of drafts), and an anthology of full-length texts from different genres. This author showcase acts as a testament to writing as a recursive process; exhibiting how students collect new strategies and experiment with a range of purposes for writing.

As a capstone project for the writing unit, I place a large emphasis the portfolio's student reflection. I think it is important for students to experience reflection writing so that they can record their journey from a novice to experienced writer. The reflection provides educators with an invaluable glimpse into the minds of students who have endured a number of challenges and obstacles that writing poses. Engaging students in discourse about the writing process is also (hopefully) as valuable to the writers themselves. Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz describe how this kind of process "allow[s] us to remember not so much what we did, but who we once were and how the past self connects to who we are today."<sup>vii</sup>

Creating a portfolio as a capstone project will serve several functions in this unit. Primarily, the act of collecting one's writing samples will provide for reflective opportunities. Bobbi Hansen, an advocate for the use of portfolios, describes how the use of this tool exhibits a shift in not only instructional practice, but an evolution in the approach to assessing writing. In the opening of her article on reflective portfolios, she introduces this activity "involves students in a rich variety of cognitive, affective, and pragmatic work opportunities" that educators value in writing curriculum. She argues that this model "stresses enriched writing environments for all students including those with learning disabilities, and an emphasis on 'writing to learn' rather than 'learning to write' as an isolated practice engaged in for its own sake."<sup>viii</sup> Essentially, she envisions portfolio projects as exercises in shifting the cognitive demand from the teacher to the student. When portfolios rely heavily on reflection, students are engaged in critical analysis of what they've learned over the course of the instructional period. And since this analysis of their writing growth derives from the author themselves, the conclusions drawn about progress is more valuable to the individual. Hansen reports from her experiment with 5th grade portfolio writing that, "this special project revealed to all of us that reflection via writing is a key component to ownership of course objectives for each individual."<sup>ix</sup> The ownership of learning, therefore relies more on the student than the instructor. This is more valuable since students are more likely to internalize and address their areas of weakness since they were responsible and engaged in a self-critique.

Students have options when it comes to which tool they use to house their digital portfolio. I have had the best experience with using Google Sites with my classes because my students found the design tools to be more intuitive than competing sites. Although I have allowed students who are more familiar with WordPress to make their projects with a tool that they have successfully used in the past. It should not make much of an impact

if you have students utilizing different tools in the classroom so long as each student's work exhibits the same learning outcomes.

To my surprise, most students have experimented with some form of web design before they came to my classroom. This meant that at times, I would meander around the room idly swinging my pen side-to-side, waiting for students to ask for my assistance. If your students are completely new to web design, the major features you'll be teaching are how to create pages and subpages as well as how to embed content from secondary devices or accounts. Thankfully, Youtube houses dozens of quality tutorials to support teachers and students in time of need. Or, when you feel comfortable, you can record tutorials of the process using the free software, Screencastify. For easy access, I posted these instructional videos to our LMS system, Schoology.

The portfolio specifications that were important to my course were that the page should demonstrate a variety of foundational digital text features including: navigation toolbars, main page, sub-page, multiple media formats (image, audio, or video), and organizational features. The content of the portfolio should reflect the range of writing skills throughout the semester; in our case, blogs, mentor texts, and explanatory writing pieces.

### **Final Thoughts**

Digital writing opportunities have added the color, detail, and intrigue back into my classroom instruction. But it's not the technology itself that makes writing instruction more valuable. I believe the success of digital writing assignments is determined by the way that educators incorporate them into the fabric of the Language Arts curriculum that determines how valuable the assignments will be for students. I am confident that digital writing tasks are so revolutionary because what they offer students is a unique and creative forum to share ideas that matter to the authors themselves. English professor, Joseph Harris emphasizes the importance of authentic student writing when he argues, "The point is not to learn to write to the specs of a particular genre, or to compose in a particular print or digital mode, but to work with texts and ideas in whatever form best suits your ambitions in writing"<sup>x</sup>. Ultimately, for writing to be most valuable for students, the form that communicates the author's passions, interests, and ideas most effectively is the writing format that should be most celebrated.

### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> Sondra, Pearl and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The art and craft of creative nonfiction*. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2014), 20.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Kathy Mills & Amanda Levido. *iPed: Pedagogy for Digital Text Production*. (The Reading Teacher)
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid
- <sup>v</sup> Jerry Jenkins. *How to Write an Anecdote*.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ruth Culham, *The Writing Thief*. (Newark, DE: International Reading Association), 41.
- <sup>vii</sup> Sondra, Pearl and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The art and craft of creative nonfiction*. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2014), 52.
- <sup>viii</sup> Bobbi Hansen. *Using reflective portfolios as a tool to teach writing to students with learning disabilities: A project for preservice teachers*, (Reading and Writing Quarterly, 1998) Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057356980140305>, 308-309.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid
- <sup>x</sup> Joseph Harris. *Rewriting: How to do things with texts*. (Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2017), 135.