Action Research >>

Social Networking Empowers Reluctant Writers

Pencil in hand, paper on desk, board filled with words and images to stimulate prose and… nothing. A clock ticks loudly, the paper remains blank, shoulders slump and frustration grows.

We all teach reluctant writers. These are students who struggle to write as a result of one or more habitual affective, cognitive or physical barriers. As educators, we are skilled at modeling, deconstructing, scaffolding, co-writing and conferencing. And yet, in my classroom this year, a small group of reluctant writers held strong against my pedagogy. I needed a new tool.

How could I transform students' writing experiences? What if academic writing looked and felt like social networking? What if writing became an interactive, real-time exchange of ideas? Could membership in an online community make a difference to literacy outcomes?

In an action research study, I investigated the impact on an online community on reluctant 4th Grade writers. *Edmodo* was chosen as the platform for building a writers' club. This network provides a Facebook-style interface, while maintaining student privacy. A focus group was selected on the basis of surveys, observation and work samples, in which habitual barriers were identified. Over several weeks, the students completed short writing tasks. Half were completed on paper and half were posted online. Each sample was marked against a rubric. The criteria included quality (content, vocabulary, structure and conventions), fluency (words per minute and length of off-task pauses) and self-assessment. In each case, the students circled a picture in response to the questions: How do I feel about writing today? How do I feel about myself as a writer?

The results of my study were mixed. On the one hand, online writing had no impact on either fluency or cognitive barriers. Whether on paper or online, students wrote the same number of words per minute, with no change in output. Students also described similar cognitive frustrations while writing in both forms. The most frequent comments were: *"I can't think of an idea"* and *"I can't get my idea into words"*. This is an important reminder that online learning does not replace quality teaching. In any medium, students need our expertise in vocabulary development, mind mapping and scaffolding to support generation and translation during writing.

However, online writing had a significant impact on student affect. During the online tasks, students recorded improved attitudes towards writing and greater confidence in their skills. This is a critical finding as affective barriers are key causes of reluctance. During surveys and conferences, the students described two main motivators: enjoyment of the interface and an online audience. Students explained, *"It's much more funner"* (sic), *"I can tell everyone my words"*, *"My friends can see my writing and I like that"* and *"I can send it fast to everyone."* The motivational influence of an audience is well documented and can be harnessed with both immediacy and authenticity in an online forum.

In addition, the students' online writing was of a higher quality than their paper compositions. When rubrics were scored and compared, the online results were statistically different from the paper scores, with particular improvements in structure and use of conventions. When surveyed, students explained that online writing aids their revision and elaboration processes. They said, *"I can edit and delete my posts"*, *"I can write it a few times"*, *"It's easier to fix"*, *"It helps me change my mistakes"* and *"I can just write more. I keep adding."* It seems that an online interface offers students greater control over composition, editing and publishing, which in turn, improves the quality of their writing.

I am not suggesting that online networks are a panacea for reluctant writers and frustrated teachers. Indeed, in this study the online interface had no impact on cognitive barriers. However, in my 4th Grade classroom, a group of extremely reluctant writers were empowered to write and write well. They showed exciting improvements in motivation, confidence and compositional quality, while posting their work online. I encourage educators to embrace the immediacy, authenticity and excitement these networks provide. I believe online communities transform the way students experience language and develop as writers.

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