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Out with the Old and in with the New: Why Technology Improves the Writing Process

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When the COVID-19 pandemic case numbers continued to rise in the United States leading into the new 2020-2021 school year, it was not a surprise that my district decided to go completely remote for the first term. Brockton, Massachusetts is an inner-city, Title I school district with the majority of students coming from low-income households. As a result, the city was and still is consistently in the high-risk zone. While I knew this decision was the right decision to keep staff, students, and families safe, a panic set in me. We received grants to *finally* get computers to each student in the district, but with years of not having enough of them, most of my students and I were unfamiliar with the various technological features that were now open to us. As an English teacher, one of my biggest curriculum concerns was how could

I possibly teach students to write an essay through the computer. It turns out that my fears were unfounded, and I have been pleasantly surprised by my experience. With a little bit more freedom to take the time we need to work with our students, the writing process really became more recursive and circular, and the various features that were implemented by myself and my students using our technology actually improved student engagement and products produced compared to years past. I can admit that every group of students varies from year to year, but research in composition theory supports that my experience was not an isolated one.

During the 1980s, the process approach to writing began to make its appearance, not just in theory, but in practice in high school and college methods courses (Noskin 34). Leading composition theorists like Janet Eming and Donald M. Murray “believed that viewing writing as a process instead of a product could help students better understand how they could develop, control, and use their writing skills” (Dziack 1). Essentially, by having students focus on the process of their writing instead of having the end goal of a finished product, students are developing and applying improved writing skills.

Setting aside a significant amount of class time for writing became part of the norm in secondary English language arts (ELA) classrooms. Students were being encouraged to prewrite and plan, draft, revise, peer edit, and then finally get ready for their final drafts. This was done in a recursive way that allowed students to “circle back” to stages to improve their work. Teachers everywhere began to see the benefits of implementing the writing process in their classrooms. Educators saw that using the writing process “made

students more secure and confident because it gave them clearly defined steps to follow. Following the steps as prescribed would, in many cases, lead to more effective written works” (Dziack 1). By acknowledging that writing is a process, mistakes are to be made, and that there is never really a final, “perfect” product, the amount of pressure on students has decreased and allowed room for them to produce better writing. In my 9th-grade class, that is something that I have seen first-hand as well.

Adding technology to the writing process benefits students across the board. Evemnova has found that “students with learning disabilities (LD) and emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) struggle with the writing process. Technology has shown to be effective in supporting prewriting, drafting, revising, proofreading, and publishing of written products” (79). Having this extra support of technology for our students should be considered a “best practice” in education. Additionally, by incorporating technology in each stage of the writing process, Kane states that “we can guide students in developing and sharing multimodal composition, strengthening their twenty-first-century literacy skills in the process” (101). Our world is constantly changing because of technology, and we can change and improve the writing process by doing the same.

Planning

I like to refer to the first stage of the writing process as “planning” rather than the common “pre-writing” title it usually receives. Prewriting implies that writing only happens in the drafting stage, but that is not the case. The expectation is that students are writing constantly throughout the writing process and

not just when drafting begins. As professors McKeown and Fitzpatrick note, the planning stage is meant to be “the first stage of the writing process, but it is a step students frequently skip or rush” (261). My own 9th-grade students admitted to me that they usually skip this stage, but it’s because they “don’t know how to do it.” This is where modeling is incredibly important. Teachers should speak aloud their ideas, frustrations, and overall thought process of the planning stage before having their own students start. During this stage, students should be “setting goals, producing ideas, and organizing ideas” (McKeown and Fitzpatrick 261). Research indicates that planning activities positively impact writing outcomes and therefore should be a part of the process, where students spend a large majority of their time and circle back to if needed. Educator David Noskin states that, “It is important to talk with your students about the many different brainstorming strategies, from listing to freewriting, and help them determine for themselves which strategy works best” (35). Every student thinks and works differently, so they should be able to use a strategy that helps them the most.

Some of the common types of planning strategies are talking it out, brainstorming, cluster/web/mind maps, free writing, storyboards, and drawing. However, by adding an element of technology to these different strategies, students will become more engaged with this part of the process and enhance other skills they will need outside of the English classroom. Technology can expose students to “multimodal composition even at the preliminary stage” (Kane 101). In today’s technology-driven society, the mastery of being able to write in multiple modes is essential to

strengthening their twenty-first-century skills. So, not only are students strengthening their writing skills, but they are also strengthening skills they will need for our technological world. Kane notes that “pencil and paper provide an outlet for brainstorming, but so do prewriting tools such as Popplet for concept mapping, Evernote for note taking and Timeline for graphic representations” (102). At this point, these different technology support strategies begin to resemble how students use technologies outside of school and allow teachers to capitalize on students’ interests (Evmenova 79). Because these technological features are similar to the apps and games students use on a day-to-day basis, students are more likely to attempt their work as the planning stage now incorporates strategies that are more familiar to them.

As I mentioned earlier, my school has been completely remote since the start of the school year. I always begin the year with a narrative essay and a survey about the students’ thoughts and feelings on writing. Almost every student stated in this survey that they usually skip the planning part of the process because they do not know how to do it. I spent an entire class period modeling using Google’s WhiteBoard application, creating a brainstorming map of ideas I could write about for my own narrative essay. I circled great ideas I had, added arrows that connected ideas, and crossed out weaker ideas, all while speaking aloud my thought process on choosing an idea. I even copied and pasted memes onto this electronic WhiteBoard that either summarized that event in my life or my thoughts on that idea. All my students had to do was watch, listen, and then type out anything they noticed I was doing in the meeting chat. The next day,

they began their own planning process. I encouraged and provided multiple, different forms of technology-based graphic organizers. Evmenova argues that while graphic organizers do help writers plan and stay on task, technology-based graphic organizers help our students even more because they “provide additional varying degrees of support through outlines and writing guides, pictures to visually represent the relationships between ideas, audio recording capabilities to get the ideas down, and motivational media features” (81). The classroom results I saw because of these extra supports were outstanding.

While I did show my students other methods of planning through various apps (online versions of timelines, freewriting techniques using Microsoft Word, and creating a story board using StoryBoard), many of my students chose creating their own graphic organizer based off of my example. All of their organizers were different: some were all picture based, some had audio comments of their thoughts, and some looked like a traditional mind map. The audio comments, pictures and traditional written ideas allowed for differentiation and supported students who think and plan in various ways. In my four years of teaching English, this was the first time every single student submitted some kind proof of their planning process. At the end of our narrative essay unit, I also had more essays turned in on time than I ever had before. One student said he liked that he was able to add memes to his graphic organizer because it reminded him of telling a story to his friend through texts, and one student, to my greatest pleasure, even said, “This was fun.” At the end of our essay unit, I had all of my students complete a survey reflecting on their writing process. The majority of my students

noted that the planning process and the conferences (which I will discuss in the revising stage) were the most beneficial to them when writing their narrative essays. By having this stage of the writing process in a completely technological form, it provided additional student support and clear improvement of production of work compared to years past, and that cannot be dismissed.

Drafting

During the drafting stage, students continue to plan and organize. They are not even continuously writing during this stage; “the act is interrupted with pauses where students revisit their purpose, change their focus, brainstorm additionally, or talk through a trouble spot” (Noskin 36). This is where we really see the recursive nature of the writing process. Students can begin drafting and realize that maybe their idea is not as strong as they originally thought, so they circle back to the planning stage. Our role as teachers is to provide them time and support to compose their writing pieces. However, it would be naïve to believe that every student is ready to begin the drafting process on the same day and at the same time. Because the writing process is so recursive, “one person might be ready to write the first draft at the beginning of the class hour only to find herself needing to brainstorm due to a block” (Noskin 36). The reality is that teachers should be prepared to be more realistic and flexible about the drafting process in their classrooms. They should understand that each student will not be at the same point in their writing, and our jobs are to support them, help them understand the importance of writing and provide them with strategies to be successful in their writing.

Allowing students to draft their writing using technology has more advantages than the typical pen and paper phase that is seen in most secondary classrooms. Word processing programs provide our students with additional support, especially for those with learning disabilities or emotional behavior disabilities (Evmenova 78). Most word processors like Microsoft Word and Google Docs are equipped with word prediction and speech recognition programs that are free to use within their programs. Additionally, many students, especially those with an LD or EBD, tend to struggle with the act of handwriting itself. By allowing students to use a word processor to type out or use a word recognition program to draft their writing, we are providing an additional support to help them in their writing. Most word processors also come with a feature that outlines writing in MLA format. For students who struggle with organization, this provides an opportunity for them to focus on their writing rather than them feeling anxious about format. Students with a learning disability or emotional disorder disability tend to “produce writing that is shorter, marked with mechanical errors, and lower in overall quality. Such limited success only heightens their lack of motivation to write” (Evmenova 78). The integration of technology is a beneficial support for our students who have these disabilities that will improve the quantity and quality of their writing.

In my classroom in the past, I have always given the choice to students to choose whether they would like to handwrite their essays in class or receive a pass to type out their essays in the library. Many of my students would decide to just stay in class to write their essays, or merely choose not to write them at all.

Based off of the results from my students' drafts this year, I feel as if I have done my previous kids a disservice. As a Title I district, my school received grants to make sure every student had a laptop to use for remote learning this school year. My students this year had no choice but to use word processors for their essays. While, as a whole, the quality of their writing did not have much change from years past, the quantity improved. I received submissions of much longer drafts than I ever have. With my students on Individualized Educations Plans (IEPs), the quality of their writing improved compared to students on IEPs in the past. I showed these students how to use the text-to-speech features and many of them used that option to compose their drafts. In comparison to years past, I saw a significant decrease in unfinished thoughts and fragmented sentences, and I saw an increase in cohesive narrative stories. I do acknowledge that students are completely different year to year, but there was such a significant change in comparison that I could not help but start to wonder that maybe a reliance on technology in the classroom is a good thing.

Implementing the drafting stage took patience and time in my classroom. This stage took almost three weeks in class, as we had mini-lessons about thesis statements, organization of a narrative essay and elements of a narrative (showing not telling, plot, adding conversations, lessons learned, etc.). During those mini-lessons, I had students constantly refer back to their graphic organizers. We would look at mentor texts (the majority were past *New York Times* narrative essay contest winners) and then identify and discuss the element of a narrative at which we were looking. My students then would look at a part of their graphic

organizers they created and would practice using the narrative element we looked at in class. From there, they began organizing their drafts. Students would transcribe their audio comments, create paragraphs from the meme or picture representations they had and expand on written comments from their organizers, all while incorporating the different mini-lessons we had used. I will admit, the survey comments from students were not positive, but they were positive to me. The majority of my students did not like this stage, but the most frequent comment on the survey for why they felt this way was "I've never written so much before" or "I did too much writing". I did not give my students a word count at this point, and I did not tell them to match the length of the mentor texts we were reading; all I told them to do was to use their graphic organizers, use our mini-lessons, and begin writing. While they personally may have not liked this stage, the use of the word processor and their technological graphic organizers significantly increased the amount of writing students accomplished in their drafts.

Revising

During the revision stage, students should "determine what needs to be added, deleted, or rearranged" (Noskin 37). Our job as teachers is to help our students remove themselves from their own work and look at it from an outsider's perspective. Many students tend to submit their "rough drafts" as their final publication and skip this stage entirely. The reasons for this can range from not knowing exactly what to do or how to do revision to not enough emphasis being placed on the fact that writing is a process and not a final product. Thorough revision in the classroom can

be done through student models, teacher conferences and collaboration.

During this stage, it is important for teachers to use a student essay model and "model the analytical steps in the process of revision" (Noskin 37). Students may not know what or how to revise their own papers, and most of the time, checklists do not help them. Seeing someone go through this process will allow them the opportunity to think and apply how they would go through this process themselves. Teacher conferences are another recommended strategy for revision in the classroom. Teachers meeting with students and allowing them to talk about their own writing allows students to "discover connections, examples, and incidents that can strengthen their writing" (Tchudi 118). Professor Stephen Tchudi recommends that teachers spend a typical 50-minute class period conducting "roving conferences" (moving from desk to desk) meeting with 12-15 students (118). This allows teachers to narrow the discussion to exactly with which the student needs help.

Finally, the third major pedagogical approach to revision is peer collaboration. Educator Linda Friedrich states that peer collaboration has "been tested through experimental and quasi-experimental research for both elementary and secondary learners," and that collaboration "can have a positive impact on writing quality" (36). This positive impact on writing happens when teachers create an environment where "students are constantly encouraged to try hard, believe that the skills and strategies they are learning will permit them to write well, and attribute success to effort and the tactics they are learning" (Friedrich 37). Establishing group norms and creating multiple opportunities for collaborative work will help foster this kind of envi-

ronment and will help writers "respond more effectively to their peers' writing" (Friedrich 43). While these strategies have been proven effective by researchers and teachers themselves, all of them are activities that typically take place in the physical classroom. How can this be accommodated for an online setting?

There are numerous tools that can be used to support the revision process in a remote classroom and actually improve this stage. Evmenova notes that for independent proof reading and revising, talking word processors and text-to-speech programs are beneficial to students because this technology "reads aloud what is typed, letter by letter, word by word, and sentence by sentence" which allows students to "hear the mistakes they have made and therefore improve their ability to edit independently" (83). Allowing students to start revising independently will help with the fact that students will be at different points in the process. Some of the most common talking word processors are WriteOutLoud, TextHelp, Read and Write, and Natural Reader. However, many learning management systems (LMS) like OneNote and Canvas come with these programs built in already. Many LMSs have programs built into their systems that provide an option for comments and drawing tools that will help improve the modeling process of revision. By modeling this way, it saves teachers time instead of writing it out, it allows for more legible handwriting, the process can be recorded for students to refer back to, and each student can save a copy of the revised model. Without technology, many students would not have access to this information. LMSs and video conferencing programs also provide easy and accessible ways for teacher conferences and peer collaboration. Teachers can set up

easily timed meetings with students, and the majority of LMSs and video conferencing programs come with a “breakout group” option that will immediately place students in either random or pre-assigned groups to work. This saves more time than the usual “shuffling” around that happens in a typical classroom.

When my students started to reach this phase of the writing process, I was excited. Each part of the writing process in the technological setting surprised me with how much student work improved, so I could not wait to see what we could do in this stage with the tools we had. As a class, we started with me modeling the revision process on a student’s paper. Any students who would like to have their paper used as an example used the raise hand feature in our video conferencing system. I chose 5 students and modeled the revision process on different parts of their essays, by sharing my screen and using the highlighting and comment feature in Microsoft Word. I also recorded that session so students who were absent had access to see that modeling take place, which they would not have been able to do if they were absent in the typical classroom. A few of my students who were not absent told me that they went back and watched the revising video. One student wanted to see how I “fixed” a classmate’s hook in the introduction, one wanted to see again how I did quotation marks, and one said she “spaced out” when I was talking about revising the conclusion paragraph. Having the video for students to refer back to, regardless of whether they were absent or needed a second look, saved me class time from having to go over specifics again and allowed students to take the initiative to find the answer for themselves.

For my teacher conferences, I had students

“book” a 20-minute conference time during our class period through Microsoft Bookings. This allowed me to meet with students who needed my immediate help and allowed for students who needed more time to keep writing before I visited them. These were some of the most successful conferences I have ever had. There were none of the typical distractions that happen in a usual classroom, and students came prepared to these conferences by having specific questions ready for me about their papers. I let them do most of the talking, and I provided support and feedback. In the survey I gave my students at the end of our writing process, the conferences were claimed to be a beneficial part of the process along with the brainstorming. Some of the comments from the survey were: “I liked that it was just me and Ms. L, and she was just focused on me.” “I was stuck on what to add but you helped me think of more ideas.” “I liked that we could meet with you when we were ready to.” And “You made me feel better about my writing.” Between these comments and the revisions that took place between our conferences and final drafts, I believe the virtual conferences benefited my students more than a one-on-one session in the physical classroom would have.

The one thing I did not do, that I regret not doing, is peer collaboration. Microsoft Teams, the LMS we use, has a breakout group feature that allows students to work in groups in an online meeting. It was there and available, but my own anxiety got in the way of taking advantage of it. During the writing process reflection, I asked students if they missed peer collaboration and why. Every student said no, and their reasoning is that they were too nervous to have someone other than me read about their personal lives (we

were completing narrative essays), or that they did not trust their classmates to provide constructive feedback. Tchudi offers advice to pair students together rather than in groups to combat that anxiety they face. The next essay we complete in class, I plan on taking his advice and making sure that we create norms for groups as well as scaffold collaboration activities leading up to this moment. I regret not integrating peer collaboration, as research has proven that it does improve students’ quality of writing, especially since I had all of these technological tools that would have made this process so much easier for my students.

Publishing

For the writing process to really work, there needs to be an emphasis that writing is a circular and recursive process. A “final draft” is never perfect and could benefit from revisiting the different phases of the writing process. However, in the English classroom, we still need to collect a product due to grades and meeting standards. Typically, teachers are the only audience for our students’ final products, and, once graded, the paper gets handed back to the student. However, with technology, there comes numerous opportunities for publishing work and expanding students’ audiences.

Sharing their work outside of the classroom forces students to consider questions beyond the typical audience (Kane 103). They have to consider their word choice, if they’re getting their point across, and how it will be received. Students can submit their work to National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Achievement Awards in Writing contest; to *Polyphony Lit*, which is an international literary magazine for high school writers; and to *Youth Voice Live*, which is

a website for teenagers to have discussions regarding things about which they are passionate. There are so many more websites that offer similar audiences, and the possibilities are endless for our students to see the importance of writing besides just submitting a final product to their English teacher.

For my own classroom, I encouraged my students to submit their final products to the *New York Times* Narrative Essay Writing Contest. Students who were first grumbling about writing an essay were suddenly excited. They had purpose and an audience besides just me. During our conferences, I had students asking, “How can I make this better to win that contest,” and they *listened* to my advice. In years past, students would merely ask how they could pass. I even had students ask if we could enter a contest for every essay we write. The opportunities that technology provides for students to see the purpose and importance of writing, as well as getting them excited about writing, cannot be forgotten or dismissed.

Conclusion

The writing process has proved itself through years of composition theory and educational pedagogy that it is an effective approach for teaching writing in the classroom. However, by implementing technology in each stage of the writing process, the writing process as a whole will improve. Technology provides resources for our classes that improve student engagement, improve 21st-century skills students will need outside of the classroom, provide peer collaboration opportunities and provide opportunities for a wider range of publication and audience. For our students who are on IEPs or other accommodation plans, the writing pro-

cess itself is an accommodation as it is work that is chunked into manageable steps. However, technology, like text-to-speech and talking word processors, provides additional accommodations for our students who need it the most. The opportunities that are available to our students by adding technology to the writing process have long-term benefits and will foster a community of students who are actually excited to write.

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