

The TRILLIUM

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USING TECHNOLOGY



Using Technology as an Instructional Tool for Writing

By Joe Meagher

Teacher, St James Catholic School, Ottawa

It was one of those “aha” moments. I was showing my class how I use information from a graphic organizer to write a first draft. Using word processing software, I cut and paste the jot notes into a new text document, and then quickly add a few connecting words and commas to make the sentences complete. Behind me, I heard Danny say; “Now I get it.”

Danny was like many students I have taught who have difficulty using a graphic organizer to write a quick draft. Students often want to start writing a final copy based on what’s in their head today, not what they brainstormed and organized yesterday. Then students moan and groan during the revising, editing and publishing phases. I can hear the lament, “Do we have to copy this again?”

But our story with Danny doesn’t end there. When it was his turn to start writing his first draft, his hand shot up. “Mr. Meagher, I don’t know what to do.” My

heart sank; I thought he hadn’t gotten it after all. I took a deep breath and reminded Danny of what I had just demonstrated: “What did you see happening on the screen at this point in the writing process?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied.

Danny just needed to be reminded of what he had seen. I think Danny “got it” because “it” happened right before his eyes and that it happened quickly—in the blink of an eye. For students who are quick to “zone out” or are easily distracted, the power of technology is in the speed at which it allows us to work, and in the way we interact with it, both visually and kinesthetically.

Technology allows me to model writing quickly. I

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can type faster on the SMART board than I can write on chart paper, and I can manipulate data and text much more quickly and efficiently than paper and pen. It also speeds up the writing process, from research to the final published product. I can quickly model editing and revising on the screen, and I can quickly make the final product look professional. I find students are much more engaged because something is almost always happening on the screen.

Modeling writing using technology supports visual and kinesthetic learners because it is a very visual and hands-on process. As I type, the student can see the development of the text, along with the errors or miscues along the way. The red and green squiggles under misspelled words or poorly phrased sentences stand out. Key words and ideas can be easily highlighted, moved and changed. Whether it is the use of active verbs in a descriptive report, concrete nouns in a news report

or words that create mood in a persuasive letter, I can highlight them and change weak words into strong words.

In my class this year I have three students using assistive technology; they have dedicated laptops and software at their disposal. They benefit from the modeling and shared writing because they use the same technology that we are using in class. For them the modeling is seamless. These students are also given a level playing field; they no longer feel like they're playing catch up with peers who are always ahead of them.

And during modeled or shared writing, writing exemplars are created. At each stage of the writing process I leave on the SMART board what we just did — this becomes our writing exemplar.

The students are becoming aware of how writing is an iterative process because they naturally find themselves adding ideas, or doing more research, in the later writing stages to enhance their writing; something they would not have done previously.

The attraction of this technology is threefold:

>> FIRST // It makes the product look good. Add some bold characters, change the title font, insert a picture or clip art, and the simplest of texts can start to look professional.

>> SECOND // It allows for creativity. This year I started experimenting with the final product — not limiting the students to a written report. I was amazed at what some students created: Digital presentations using Photostory, MovieMaker, PowerPoint or other electronic software. Several students who would have struggled to submit an acceptable written report created digital presentations that exceeded the expectations of the assignment.

>> THIRD // With a computer, students have all the tools for writing at their fingertips. The use of spell check and grammar check are just a click away. A graphic image is just a google away. Photos can be taken and downloaded within minutes (we have two digital cameras in the class), and the final product can be printed on the class laser printer.

Still, using technology is not without its challenges. We have system crashes, "lost" or improperly saved files and the computers that some days seem to take a long time to power up. One of the biggest challenges has been moving the files from school to home and back. Some students use memory sticks, others e-mail their files to themselves on their own hotmail account or post their work to the class wiki; several students use re-writeable CDs. ❖

TDSB Raises Math Scores and Garners National Award

By Cheryl Paige

Principal, Joyce Public School



The Toronto District School Board recently won the National Technology Innovation Award for Elementary Education for SparkPlug, an innovative blended professional development model that integrates the best elementary math instruction with advanced technology, enabling teachers to improve math learning outcomes.

SparkPlug, which evolved over two years and took place in 14 small inner-city elementary schools in the TDSB, addressed the fact that only 56% of the children at Grade 3 and 41% of the children at grade 6 achieved at the expected Ontario level in mathematics as measured by the provincial Education Quality and Achievement Office. The overall challenge and goal of this initiative was to increase the mathematics achievement among Grade three and Grade six students (1,100 in total) in these schools.

The project was dubbed “SparkPlug” because just as a spark plug is used in machines to bridge the air gap between two electrodes, this initiative was attempting to bridge the gaps between teaching/learning and student achievement.

To support this change in achievement, the SparkPlug Project also chose to investigate the value of SMART Board interactive whiteboards to enrich teachers’ practice and improve students’ mathematics achievement.

Ten half-day professional development sessions were conducted throughout the two-year period, during which teachers became familiar with “big ideas” of each math strand, best practices and strategies for mathematics instruction, examined student work and learned about advanced features on the interactive whiteboard, and shared lessons.

Teachers continued this collaboration throughout each year by

participating in an on-line conference to further extend their learning and share mathematics notebook lesson files.

Improvement in learning outcomes was confirmed by significantly increased performance on standardized tests. At the grade 3 level there was an 11 percent increase in the number of students achieving at the provincial level and a 44 percent increase in the number of children achieving at the highest level in mathematics, while the number of grade 6 students performing at the provincial level increased by 22 percent.

The educators involved overwhelmingly endorsed this continuous blended professional development model as a means of accelerating and enriching their own personal learning about how to teach mathematics effectively. They reported that they spent more time networking, discussing how to teach math with other colleagues, felt less isolated (particularly those in small schools), and felt their math program was enriched because of the sharing of notebook lessons with each other. Students’ surveys also showed that they developed a more positive perception of mathematics and more confidence in their mathematics abilities. ❁

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