

Teaching for Mastery

Using Technology to Improve Student Writing

By
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“After witnessing some appropriate use of computers and other forms of technology in our schools, we are convinced we must use the teaching tools of our time to influence young people in a positive, interactive way. We are not suggesting the use of technology alone provides the means of improved learning. That comes from the synergy of all the teaching strategies we use to help students learn what is essential.”

Technology in the Schools, So What

By Stephen L. Kleinsmith, The School Administrator, April 1997

Research Question

The question I have been investigating is: How does my students' ability to self-edit improve when I use their own writing samples to provide whole class guided editing using Power Point and an LCD projector? The question has altered over the course of the research into: How can I best use technology to improve my students' ability to find and correct mistakes in grammar and improve writing content? How can I teach my students to “master” the basic grammatical and writing concepts we have been focusing on?

Background and Rationale

I am the English language development teacher at my school, Luther Burbank Middle School in San Francisco, California. I teach both the newly immigrated students

who come to me with little or no previous English instruction, as well as those students who have achieved “intermediate” status in their English language development. I teach both the beginner and the intermediate students for two periods each day using the District adopted High Point curriculum as well as materials I find or create.

I have been experimenting with Power Point all year in both my language classes and my math class. I have found it to be a very powerful tool. It allows me to provide very direct visual support to my students in a clear and engaging manner.

At some point, I began experimenting with using my students’ own writing to coach them through the editing process. Prior to this, I had used student models provided with the High Point curriculum. I used hard copies and transparencies to show them how to add more detail and to find mistakes in grammar. I also had my students exchange papers and peer edit.

I found that the student models provided with the textbook did not tend to include the same kinds of mistakes that my students were making. So, while I thought it was useful to show them some of the changes a teacher would recommend, the student models did not really meet their needs. Moreover, since most of my students are beginning English language learners they were all making the same kinds of mistakes and did not necessarily spot the errors in their partners work—peer editing was not proving very successful in catching their errors either. My students were not making very many changes from their rough drafts to their final drafts.

I started using my students’ own writing samples when I discussed the revision process during major writing projects. I found that I concentrated on a few basic areas: capitalization, verb conjugation, and articles. I would choose a few samples from student

work and then type them into my computer. With Power Point and an LCD projector I was able to project their work onto the screen for the whole class to see while keeping it relatively anonymous (some of my students felt compelled to announce their authorship.) I then made my own suggested changes using a different colored font.

Research Tools/Data Collection

I began by having my students do peer editing of writing assignments. I then collected these and looked for evidence of error correction. I also collected and analyzed writing samples from throughout the year, including short-answer responses to literature as well as regular writing assignments where I coached them through the writing process. I analyzed these samples looking for evidence of error correction from the rough draft to the “final draft”. I also looked for evidence of rewriting to include more details or dialogue.

Review of Literature

“The study conducted by Haas and Neuwirth shows that computer technology improves writing in both its cognitive processes (planning and revising are more accessible) and its social processes (classes which use computer networks for communication interact more than those who depend on traditional means.)” Three myths About Technology,
<http://www.enl.umassd.edu/InteractiveCourse/sgomaa/comp6.htm>

“Educational technologies that support the development of students’ writing skills include word processing, desktop publishing, multimedia composing, online publishing, and Internet communication”
North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
Critical Issue: Using Technology to Enhance Literacy Instruction
Ann Holum, Ph.D. and Jan Gahala, M.A.
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li300.htm>

Much research has been conducted on the use of technology to improve student writing. The majority conclude that using computers in the classroom has a beneficial impact on students' abilities and motivation to write. However, none of the studies looked at the use of Power Point or any other technology to provide whole class instruction in editing and revision. I needed to look into my own classroom to see evidence of that particular use of technology.

I also looked into the research on the use of scripted curriculums as I realized that one of the implications of my research was the need for teachers to be able to respond to evidence of student needs. Here the research is mixed. There is evidence of scripted curriculums improving student achievement. The National Reading Panel published a report in 1999 that supports the use of phonics-based instruction. However, that research has been attacked as being invalid as it did not include students with limited English proficiency, was conducted by researchers who had vested interests in the outcomes of the report due to connections with McGraw-Hill, and only included one classroom reading teacher. The California Educator had this to say about scripted curriculums:

“CTA believes in a balanced approach to reading – as with any subject – and maintains that teachers should have a multiplicity of strategies at their disposal and be able to pick and choose among them to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms.”

**Government, Business Drive Growth of Scripted Programs
California Educator, Volume 6, Issue 7, April 2002**

Data and Analysis

I began by looking for evidence of error correction during the revision process after peer editing. Looking at student first drafts and final drafts, I noticed very little

error correction. I then began using students' own writing to provide instruction in revision and editing. The following are examples from some of the lessons I provided my students.

Before You Move On

Character: Mama Dulce said, "Love each other, help each other." What other characters might say this? What makes you think so.

1. When Mama Dulce said "Love each other. Help each other". I think the person who would say this is grandmother. It makes me think that because she is nice and a peaceful grandma.

2. I think Arturo mami well might say this "Love each other, help each other." It make me think Arturo mami is love she family.

3. I think Leo Love and Coach tree might say "Love each other. Help each other." I think so, because they both like to help people and they take care people.

All three answers are strong. All three include the question in the answer and explain a little why the author gave that response.

All three need a little editing for grammar and a little more detail.

1. When Mama Dulce said “Love each other. Help each other”. I think the person who would say this is grandmother. It makes me think that because she is nice and a peaceful grandma.
2. I think Arturo mami well might say this “Love each other, help each other.” It make me think Arturo mami is love she family.
3. I think Leo Love and Coach tree might say “Love each other. Help each other.” I think so, because they both like to help people and they take care people.

Editing for Grammar and Adding Details

1. When Mama Dulce said, “Love each other. Help each other.”. I think the person who would say this is **Abuelita**. ~~It makes me I think that because she is nice and a peaceful grandma.~~ **she helps Arturo take his name back and she cooks for her family.**

Always put a comma after ‘said’ when the quotation comes next.
Use the character’s name when you refer to them.
Add specific details from the text to explain your thinking.
What does Abuelita do that shows she believes in helping others.

Editing for Grammar and Adding Details

2. I think Arturo's Mami well might say this, "Love each other. Help each other."—It make me I think **so because** Arturo Mami is loves ~~she~~ **her** family. **She is like a "soft dove" and works on a "policy of gentleness"**.

Always put a comma after 'said' when the quotation comes next.
Always capitalize character names.
Add specific details from the text to explain your thinking.
What does Mami do that shows she believes in helping others.

Editing for Grammar and Adding Details

3. I think Leo Love and Coach Tree might say, “Love each other. Help each other.” I think so, because they both like to help people and they take care of people. **For example, Leo Love sat in a tree all night to rescue a cat and Coach Tree volunteers to coach basketball at Arturo’s school.**

Always put a comma after ‘said’ when the quotation comes next.
Always capitalize **each word of** character names.
Add specific details from the text to explain your thinking.
What do Coach Tree and Leo Love do that shows they believe in helping others.

Editing for Grammar and Adding Details

I think Leo Love and Coach Tree will said “Love each other. Help each other.” because Leo Love was help Huitla get down from the avocado tree and return Huitla to Arturo’s family, and Coach Tree didn’t called police that José steal his stuff, just with Coach Tree during free time.

This student has done an **excellent job** adding specific details! This answer only needs to be edited for grammar.

Editing for Grammar and Adding Details

I think Leo Love and Coach Tree **would say** ~~said~~ “Love each other. Help each other.” because Leo Love ~~was help~~**ed** Huitla get down from the avocado tree and ~~return~~**ed** Huitla to Arturo’s family. ~~and~~ Coach Tree didn’t ~~called~~ **the** police that **when** José ~~steal~~ **stole** his stuff, just with ~~Coach Tree during free time~~ **instead, he made him practice basketball and study.**

Watch verb tenses.

By analyzing student writing samples before and after editing and also after whole class instruction using their own samples I have found that using Power Point and students’ own writing samples to provide whole class instruction in editing is very useful, but by no means sufficient, way to teach my students to find and correct their errors. They made the most strides in adding detail to their writing but continue to struggle with complex structures such as verb conjugation.

I also found that the most significant benefit of this strategy was that it forced me to really focus on my students’ writing and to notice exactly what concepts and grammatical forms they were not understanding. This allowed me to see trends in the class as well as individual student needs. I was then able to focus my lesson planning very specifically on my students’ needs.

I altered the scope of my original research question and began experimenting with other ways to increase my students' ability to find and correct errors. I re-taught concepts that many students were making errors in, brought my students to the computer lab to learn word processing programs, introduced them to "find the error" games on the Internet, and provided more scaffolding when re-introducing peer editing.

Using all these techniques, I have seen definite improvement in my students' ability to find and correct errors. On their last assignment of the year, I gave them red pens and had them trade papers. They marked them up using editing marks I had taught them. While some of their corrections were not accurate (one student suggested putting all verbs into the past tense when they should have been present tense) the increase in editing ability was remarkable. I certainly must have been doing something right—two of my ESL students won city-wide writing awards.

Policy Implications

The policy implications of this research are clear. First, having access to technology such as the internet, a computer with Power Point, and an LCD projector can allow a teacher to really focus on individual student needs in a very powerful way. The biggest implication, however, is that teachers need to have the freedom and flexibility to assess their students and alter the curriculum to meet students' needs. I had such freedom and was able to re-teach and focus my lessons on those concepts my students had not yet mastered. I would not have had this freedom if I was required to stick to a rigid curriculum pacing guide or was not allowed to use other resources other than the district adopted materials.

Next Steps

I am fortunate in being able to be very flexible in designing lessons to suit my students' needs. It would be interesting to look throughout the District and the state to see how many teachers still have this freedom. State standards and pacing guides are designed to improve student learning, but many of our teachers are being required to move on to new standards long before their students have mastered those already taught. I would like to see how many teachers in the district feel they are teaching for "exposure" rather than "mastery".