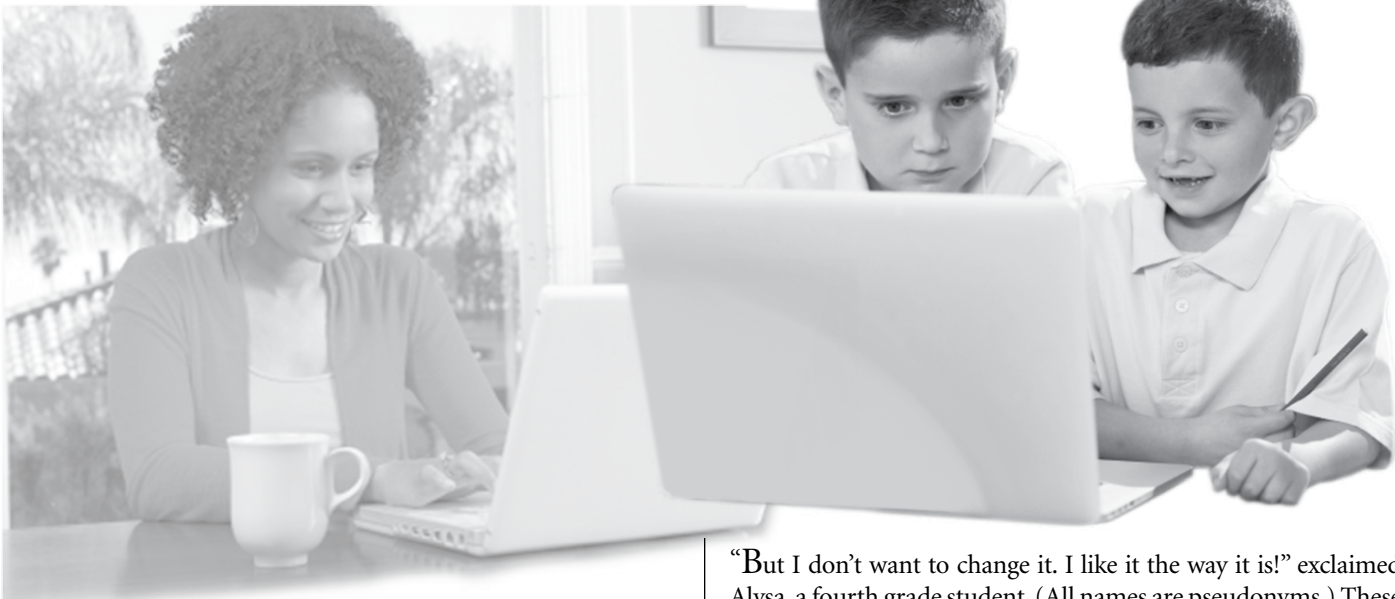


Nancy Abell

Walking Their Walk, Talking Their Talk: Coaching with Google Docs to Promote Better Student Writing



Abstract

This article is based on an action research study, conducted in a suburban central Texas elementary school, that explored the efficacy of providing feedback to student writers through a Web 2.0 platform of Google Docs. The study involved matching 13 elementary writers with adult writing coaches in the school. The study incorporated four data sources including an analytic rubric, student and coach surveys, student work samples, and a reflective research journal. The research findings suggest that using computers to provide feedback solved time constraints teachers faced and also helped facilitate relationships between students and staff members. In addition, students were no longer resistant to revisiting their work, were eager to view the feedback, and revised their drafts in response to the comments provided, thus improving the overall effectiveness of their writing.

Keywords: revision, feedback, elementary writing, web 2.0 technologies, relationship building

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“But I don’t want to change it. I like it the way it is!” exclaimed Alysa, a fourth grade student. (All names are pseudonyms.) These words are painful to the ears of an elementary writing teacher, and yet, they are common to most student writers. Maybe the students are just bored with their story and ready to call it quits. Maybe they don’t believe anyone will care about their story. Or maybe the students have not received timely feedback on what they have written.

In a class of many active children, it can be an exhausting task for a teacher to conduct meaningful writing conference conversations to help guide each student through the writing process, and many students just do not seem to have the stamina to revise their story. Yet teachers witness many of these same students composing on computer software such as Comic Life for extended days without complaint, editing and revising their work, often with excellent results. Perhaps technology is a key?

What Teachers Understand

Teachers know that students demonstrate increased motivation when we put technology in their hands, and educational leaders agree that we need to engage our students with technology more often. Both the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English recently posted position statements calling for the increased use of curricular applications of Information Communication Technologies (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011). Researchers have been studying the efficacy of

computer use with student writers for over 20 years, and they have found that computer use changes the nature of instruction (Pope & Golub, 2000).

Teachers notice increased motivation and engagement when students use a computer to write. Children seem very comfortable with almost any application as well. Students, even nine- and ten-year-old students, seem to have an intuitive understanding of how handheld devices and computers work. They love technology’s access to the world beyond their school (Ware & Benschoter, 2011). And with the use of Internet-based, Web 2.0 writing tools such as Google Docs, Zoho Writer, and Scribble Press, students can instantly become “published” authors. This immediacy allows the students to communicate with an audience outside of the classroom.

Effective teachers also understand that providing timely feedback to written work is essential to successful revision. It enhances student performance and achievement because feedback provides students with the information they need to reach their goals (Wiggins, 2012). Feedback can encourage the student to achieve his or her full potential or guide the student to make small changes that can lead to big improvements. For the writing teacher, the practice of providing feedback to student writers has been espoused by many researchers since the early 1980s. Many of us cut our teeth on books such as Donald Graves’s (1983) *Teachers and Children at Work* and Nancie Atwell’s (1987) *In the Middle*. We understand that often our role is like that of a writing coach. When we talk with students about their writing and understand what the children are attempting to craft, we can better guide the student writers to see their own strengths and weaknesses. This understanding, in turn, helps students have the confidence to take the risks that often lead to better writing.

Students seek feedback. They like to know what teachers think of their stories. Sometimes students will reread the entire composition repeatedly, paying close attention to the teacher feedback written in the margins (Silver & Lee, 2007). Thus, teachers must take this role very seriously and provide thoughtful, formative feedback. Students need us to look beyond the conventions and correctness

of the story. Student writers need to sense that their teachers understand them personally and are interested in what they have to say as writers (Anderson, 2005).

The Project

As a writing teacher of 45 fourth-grade student writers (including Alysa) in two different classes, I knew I had two major challenges: First, the children were not motivated to revise what they had written; and second, there was not enough time to meet everyone’s immediate feedback needs. I sought a method to use technology to connect students with someone who could be their own personal audience. I sought teachers who, with my guidance, would take a personal interest in them as children, and help guide them in their writing by providing helpful, timely feedback. And so, my plan emerged: I would utilize Web 2.0 tools of Google Docs and assign each student a writing coach.

The idea for this project actually started more than two years ago when I read an article about using Wikis to support struggling readers. In the study, as student readers communicated with preservice teachers, the researchers, Andes & Claggett (2011), observed whether the authentic reading and writing tasks led to improvement in literacy. They did. The students were actively engaged in both reading and writing on the Wiki, and as a consequence, their comprehension scores improved. Andes and Claggett found that writing for an authentic audience was key.

While preparing for my project, I read several studies about the types of feedback teachers provide to their writing students. Some refer to the feedback as “evaluative, descriptive, and informal” (Cowie, 2005), and others as “praise, advice, and criticism” (Silver & Lee, 2007). I chose to adapt from these researchers three types of feedback that I felt would benefit my students the most: corrective, clarifying, and supportive (see Table 1).

The Coaches

I first approached my friends and colleagues on my campus via email, not sure how teachers would react. Because the first few months of the spring semester are stressful in anticipation of the

Table 1
Types of Feedback With Examples

| Corrective | Clarifying | Supportive |
|---|--|--|
| Corrects conventions / mechanics | Asks for details | Identifies what is already correct |
| Corrects punctuation or capitalization | Asks for sensory information | Recognizes good word choice |
| Corrects sentence structure | Asks for more specific word choice | Recognizes descriptive literary devices such as similes |
| Corrects spelling | Seeks to improve through suggestions | Recognizes a good topic, idea, or story line |
| Corrects grammar | Asks for more information | Identifies what impresses you |
| Corrects subject-verb agreement (usage) | Seeks to clarify sentences or sections | Recognizes when a student has successfully used what you suggested |

My reflective research journal is full of students' exclamations and shouts of excitement. Each writing session, students solicited advice from their nearby friends and eagerly read aloud the feedback they had received from their coach. I noticed that from the very beginning, the student writers were motivated to write online because of their responsive audience.

upcoming state-mandated tests, I was pleasantly surprised when 13 colleagues replied that they were interested in participating. The group of volunteer writing coaches included six classroom teachers; a special education teacher; teachers of music, art, and physical education; the school principal; the librarian; and the counselor. Because these adults were volunteering their time to help me and my students, I felt it was important that they each had the chance to choose a student that he or she already knew.

I met with the 13 volunteer coaches to provide training and handouts on the best practices for providing feedback, relying heavily on Anderson's (2005) work. It was important that the coaches would take a conversational tone in their feedback to students. The goal was to encourage *revision* through revisiting and clarifying the story rather than simply informing students about what to fix or edit. I showed the writing coaches student samples, and we discussed the student needs and the merits of each type of feedback identified. I also made sure each teacher coach knew how to use the Google Docs format the kids would be using to write their compositions.

The Writers

Teacher coaches selected 13 students to participate in the study. Any student receiving special services through the Gifted and Talented program or Response to Intervention were not participating in the research; thus, the participants involved in the study represented a somewhat homogeneous group. Training the students proved energizing. The students had participated in Writer's Workshop in our classroom all year, and this project was, to them, an exciting extension to our regular language arts writing block. Students understood how getting feedback helped them with their stories, and they looked forward to what their writing coach would say. With the help of our campus technology partner, I walked the students through the process of initializing their Google accounts and how to "invite" their writing coach to read and comment on their story. With this application, the coach's feedback did not appear within the story, but rather in a sidebar to the right.

To ensure the process functioned smoothly, I also had access to each student writer's stories, but I purposely kept my comments to an absolute minimum. I wanted to reinforce through my silence that the students' audience for their online stories was not me, but rather their writing coaches.

For the first writing session, all students were given the same writing prompt: Write about a favorite school memory. Subsequent sessions functioned differently. Each time the students wrote for the project, they had the choice of going back to a previous story to revise, or to start something new. The genre was their choice too. Although most students wrote personal narratives, some also wrote poems, letters, and fantasy fiction. Under my direction, the students wrote on six different occasions. Access to their Google accounts gave them the ability to write as often as they liked from school and from home. Each time a student wrote, the coach received an alert. Coaches could then post comments at any time using the edit feature of Google Docs.

The Process

The students and I met once a week in the computer lab to work on the project. Each week that the students wrote, I read through their stories as well as the comments of each coach. Because I couldn't save or print the story with the comments (outside of the Google Cloud), I took a screen shot of each story with the coach's feedback. I created a spreadsheet to code the type of feedback provided as "Supportive," "Clarifying," "Corrective," or "Other." On the same spreadsheet, I noted the writing date, topic, feedback date, feedback codes, and student response. I wanted to chart any improvements and note strengths in student writing as well as specific needs. During each writing session, I wandered around the computer lab, taking photos and recording student comments in a reflective research journal. Near the end of the project, I sent each student writer and each coach a survey. Students were asked whether they enjoyed writing stories on the computer as well as what their thoughts were on getting feedback electronically. The coaches' survey focused on the efficacy of using an online platform for providing feedback.

In order to measure student writing progress, I created an analytical writing rubric based on the criteria of the fourth-grade Texas Education Association's (2011) STAAR state narrative writing assessment. I identified the following categories: Use of Language, Development of Ideas, Sentence Structure, and Conventions. With the collaboration of a fellow fourth grade teacher and colleague, I rated each student writer on his or her first writing sample, and again after six weeks in the project, having received feedback from their writing coach. I analyzed the results and looked for an increase or decrease in proficiency in each area.

Lessons Learned

As digital immigrants, we teachers often think of using the computer as a solitary form of working, but for these student writers, digital natives, it was anything but (Prensky, 2001).

My reflective research journal is full of students' exclamations and shouts of excitement. Each writing session, students solicited advice from their nearby friends and eagerly read aloud the feedback they had received from their coach. I noticed that from the very beginning, the student writers were motivated to write online because of their responsive audience. They looked forward to our special writing days, and many were upset when other school activities (such as a Valentine's Day party) interfered with our computer/writing time. Often, at the end of the writing session, students did not want to stop writing, and I had to insist that they turn off the computer so they could get to another class on time. That being said, not every student preferred online writing; one girl noted that she preferred the comfort of using paper and pencil. Throughout the study, however, I realized that for most kids, the excitement to write electronically was a true motivator.

Because the project was designed not to interfere with students' writing processes—such as sitting down with each student as he or she wrote and revised—I could not determine exactly why students made certain revision choices. However, I did notice students responding to each type of feedback. Capitalization and spacing mistakes were corrected when corrective feedback was given. And students certainly appreciated supportive feedback. One student reread the same comment over and over again, reassuring himself that he was on the right track. "I love your simile here," he repeated again and again. Most students attempted to elaborate and give more details when clarifying feedback was written (see Table 2). In fact, these questions provided necessary guidance for some students. During our third session, one student sat stumped at her computer. "Mrs. Mitchell, I don't know what to write about. She [the writing coach] didn't ask me any questions." Many students seek and need clarifying questions to move a piece forward. Clarifying questions and suggestions like "What colors and sounds do you remember?" and "Were you scared?" help guide the students to write with richer, more expressive detail. Coaches gave feedback seeking clarification much more often than other types of feedback (see Table 1). Many coaches also responded with personal comments that did not fit into the original three feedback categories. Comments like, "I once had a dog like that!" were coded as "Other." Feedback motivated

students and helped them to develop clear precise details in their writing, which improved the overall effectiveness of their pieces.

Using the rubric developed, most students showed gains in each of the four writing areas assessed, especially in their expressive use of language. Overall, based on the rubric developed, student word choice became much more specific and vivid, and story ideas for some were better developed in the later weeks of the study when compared to their initial piece (see summary, Table 3).

Development of ideas was the only area seemingly to decrease in proficiency. One explanation for the decline on the category of ideas could be that students were given a writing prompt for the initial writing assignment, but all subsequent compositions were written on self-selected writing topic. This finding implies that some students needed the structure of a given topic to write about or need further prewriting strategies.

Aha Moments

As I studied the piles of collected work samples, examined the rubric scores, and reread my journal entries, I realized that the type of feedback provided was less important than the fact that their coach, a newfound friend, was reading the stories and giving timely feedback while not assigning grades. It was clear that students appreciated writing to a specific audience. One writer, after looking away from her computer for a few minutes, noticed her coach had begun to comment on her story while she was away. "I just looked away and he's already posted a comment!"

Using Google Docs helped develop an immediate and ongoing relationship between students and coaches, even though they did not meet face to face. When students understood that they had a specific audience excited to read their revisions, it motivated them to want to write better. Student surveys clearly indicated the importance of the writer-coach relationship. A clear majority of students (85%) responded that they liked knowing the coach would read the story and provide feedback, and only slightly

Table 2
Examples of Student Revision as a Result of Coach Feedback

| Student Writer | Student First Draft | Coach Feedback | Student Revised Draft |
|----------------|---|--|---|
| Bryan | The first time there was a spelling bee, I studied hard. It turned out that I won the classroom one, and the 3rd grade one too! | Yes! I remember this! It might be fun to put something about how you felt during these contests. | The first time there was a spelling test, I studied hard. It turned out that I won the classroom one, and the 3rd grade one too! My heart was racing and my head felt like exploding! |
| Alysa | I was in the ocean with my cousin way out deep. My cousin spotted these giant fish as round as a ball. | And then what happened? Were you scared? What did you do? | My cousin spotted these giant fish as round as a ball. I was so terrified I could hardly move, so my cousin said, "Here, get on my shoulders!" |

Table 3
 Change in Student Writing Performance When Comparing First Writing Sample to Last

| Percentage and Numbers of Students: | Use of Language | Development of Ideas | Sentence Structure | Conventions |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Improved | 8 (62%) | 7 (54%) | 2 (15%) | 1 (7%) |
| Remained Same | 5 (38%) | 4 (31%) | 11 (85%) | 12 (93%) |
| Declined | 0 | 2 (15%) | 0 | 0 |

fewer (77%) reported that they felt being a part of the writing coach project had helped them enjoy writing.

With the construction of these personal relationships with the coaches, students seemed more motivated to write for their specific audience. In their survey, several coaches also related stories about how the project helped them to build or continue relationships with the student writer. One coach told me how touched she was when her student writer (a former student) sent her a personal email thanking her for some helpful comments on a particular story. Another teacher-coach reported that her student ran up to her in a movie theater one Saturday excitedly asking her if she had seen his newest story and to please comment on it. When the project ended, several students wanted to continue, and the coaches readily agreed. One remarked, “I would love to keep on with Sally for however long she/you desire. I’ve really enjoyed this project!”

The Takeaway

Providing feedback to students through Web 2.0 writing tools such as Google Docs helps ensure students’ curricular application of Information Communication Technologies (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011), but it also does much more. The project highlighted the importance of a positive relationship between a student and a teacher. Students eagerly anticipated the written feedback from the coach, and sometimes sought out the coach during the school day just to talk. The principal’s student writer even began referring to her as his “buddy.”

This approach to providing feedback to student writers solves both the time crunch we teachers face as well as addresses the writing stamina concerns many students encounter when trying to work for a sustained time during Writer’s Workshop. Many coaches said they preferred providing feedback electronically to traditional pen and paper. Most appreciated the ease and efficiency of adding comments electronically. Their time and effort were focused on content rather than on deciphering handwriting, so their feedback was more productive. The students recognized their own growth as writers as well. One student responded on his survey, “I think this project helped me get better at writing, and it made me get a reason to love writing.” And that, after all, is the goal of any writing teacher.

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