# Supporting Reluctant Writers with Web 2.0 Tools:

Increasing Enthusiasm, Confidence, and Resiliency

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# Abstract

This paper presents an action research study into the use of Web 2.0 tools to support struggling student writers in a high school writing support class. The study examined student attitudes and beliefs about academic writing tasks and their ability to perform these tasks, their responses to various Web 2.0 tools, and writing tasks assigned in the support class that made use of these various tools. Nearly all of the students quickly acquired competence in using digital writing tools, and all believed their confidence and writing had improved over the course of this four week study. Review of student work samples revealed increased confidence and enthusiasm for writing, but students realized only marginal gains on formal academic essays written for their English classes. The results of this study suggest that incorporating digital writing tools similar to those used by students in their personal lives has the potential to increase student confidence, enthusiasm and resiliency for writing assignments.

**Supporting Reluctant Writers with Web 2.0 Tools**

I am one of four English teachers at my small high school of approximately 350 students. We, like English teachers everywhere I suppose, struggle to find ways to get our students to complete writing assignments. On the day these assignments are due, it is not uncommon for only two-thirds of the class to turn in the assignment. We throw our hands in the air and exclaim, “We showed them how. We gave them examples. We talked about the material they were to write about. So, why won’t or can’t they write?” And we are unique in our opportunities to get these children to write. Most have been in our district since kindergarten. It is easy for our department to collaborate and articulate the writing expectations at each grade level, yet still we have seniors who do not complete their writing assignments, or do but “can’t write,” and therefore earn a failing grade. In an attempt to force students to write, my colleagues and I have even gone so far as to have all essay assignments performed as on-demand writing where students are provided with the writing prompt and expected to respond in one in-class writing session. The result, of course, is on-demand writing, which is first draft by definition, and while it may prepare students to meet the demands of various on-demand writing assessments they will encounter as detailed by the California Writing Project (2004), it does not truly address or measure the complexity of writing skills we are intended to teach.

Perhaps it is our own fear of failure that prevents us from more closely examining the problem. After all, we four teachers did what we were supposed to do according to state and district mandates, and we used “best practices” gleaned from our state-adopted curriculums, and various “teaching writing” workshops and conferences including the Bay Area Writing Project and the California State University System’s Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum. Rarely, however, do we as English faculty, take the opportunity to discuss a particular student’s writing history or fully research what obstacles may exist. Often we engage in erroneous assumptions: students don’t have computers at home; families don’t value education; non-English speaking parents can’t support their child’s writing; and, students just don’t care.

We know that writing is an important form of personal expression, but rarely do we address the very personal yet social nature of the writing task. Good writers are generally enthusiastic about writing, confident that they can succeed, and resilient enough to learn from feedback and critique and revise their writing to improve. So what happens when a student lacks one or all of these attributes?

Even for students who do complete and submit writing assignments, most often their writing is “first draft” in nature—not in that it contains spelling or grammatical errors, but in that it could be so much better and more meaningful to audience and writer if revision had occurred. Even when we use worksheets or other peer edit protocols, students complete the review as what it is—an assignment meant to be completed as quickly and painlessly as possible. It is a constant struggle to make critique and feedback a part of the larger writing process, perhaps for a variety of reasons. I believe as educators, however, that we have an obligation to better understand why so many students “can’t,” or “won’t” write and resist revision. Beyond meeting certain content standards, we know that writing is an important means of communication—one our students would greatly benefit from mastering.

Writing that serves a purpose rather than merely completing an assignment, and which is reflected upon in a revisionary process, has the capacity to sustain our knowledge construction and acquisition (Wolsey & Grisham, 2012), but because as teachers we are tasked with “teaching writing,” it is difficult to imagine the possibilities of a more transformative approach to the process of writing with our students. If we think about it, most of our students “write” all day long. They text, tweet, and post at a sometimes alarming rate. While most teachers of writing would likely agree that most of this “writing” is without much redeeming academic value, it is of the utmost importance to the students we serve, so it is, therefore, invaluable because it opens a window into what motivates young people to write—reaching out to and communicating with those with whom they are not currently face-to-face—and these are the basic requirements for successful completion of any writing task I could assign. The give-and-take nature of these digital communications takes for granted the revision process. As miscommunications occur, clarifications can occur almost simultaneously. The truncated nature of most digital communication adolescents use eliminates any need for worry or concern over spelling or other “rules” of writing. All of this, for me, begs the question: If students can and do write regularly, why can’t or won’t they write for me and what can I do about it?

My experiences with student writing over the course of my thirteen years as an English teacher, as well as my own use of digital writing tools and awareness of the ways in which teens use digital media has prompted me to research the possible benefits of using digital tools with students. My guiding research question has been: How can the use of digital writing tools increase the enthusiasm, confidence, and resiliency of students for academic writing tasks? I have been and remain hopeful that if students are allowed and encouraged to use various digital writing tools they will become not just better writers, but more knowledgeable about the academic content they are studying and themselves as conveyers of message and meaning through a written text.

In order to carry out my research and attempt answering my questions, I assembled a group of ninth and tenth grade students who were struggling with or failing various writing assignments in their core English class. These students were provided with Chrome Books© and introduced to various digital writing tools. In addition, the students used these tools in order to carry out daily writing tasks that provided the following opportunities: immediate and copious feedback from teacher and peers; freedom from the constraints of “correctness” (e.g. grammar and spelling); ability to connect personally with the writing task; and interaction with visual media associated with the writing. It was my hope that these opportunities would enable students to lower their anxiety or resistance and write in a way that was both meaningful and relatively risk-free, thereby increasing their confidence and acquiring the ability to overcome any obstacles they may encounter in terms of completing these brief assignments.

# **Review of Related Literature**

A review of the related literature reveals several trends in English language arts instruction, as teachers continue to be held accountable for teaching students to be effective communicators through writing, but it also reveals that ELA teachers need to recognize the social and cultural, rather than just technological, changes in how adolescents use and experience writing (Grabill, 2005). During at least the first half of the last century it was taken for granted by those lucky enough to receive a formal education that reading and writing instruction was a central and important part of a language arts curriculum. Our textual landscape, however, has changed dramatically, yet the means and ways with which we teach and assess reading and writing has not kept pace with the means and ways with which our students use text and digital tools to not only communicate, but to make meaning of their increasingly complex lives.

Avila (2006) reports that the National Council of Teachers of English acknowledged that emphasis on teaching to content standards had resulted in a lack of time and resources for in-depth engagement with literature. Furthermore, Avila cites a “call” from the National Endowment for the Arts to push for a renewed focus on the reading of literature and its potential to enhance the lives of those who read it. Avila (p. 101) goes on in her article to ask “How can we continue to teach students about the power of literary response when the priority is for them to achieve proficiency on standardized tests?” Avila’s research focused on urban students who were engaged in literary response, but who were also asked to make a personal connection to the novel they were studying. The students in Avila’s case study had been labeled as “basic” and “below basic” on their standardized English language arts state tests, but their literary responses were sophisticated and appeared to suggest that indeed a “transformative” experience had taken place. Through writing about the literature they had read, and being allowed to respond in a way that enabled them to further articulate their own developing identities, the students had positive and meaningful writing experiences. Digital writing tools were not used during this case study, but the social interaction inherent in the “personal connection” part of the writing assignment moves towards the social networking experiences that teens have now come to rely on to create their own evolving identities. While Avila’s research did not deal directly with the problem of students not completing writing tasks, she does reveal that students who are considered to be performing below or far-below grade level are willing and able to write given a choice of how to respond, enabling them to not just write about what they learned from the literature being studied, but to construct knowledge about the content and themselves (Wolsey & Grisham, 2012).

Avila (p. 102) sought to learn what role literary response played in “writing a new academic literacy identity.” Her study of an English language arts class, as well as three focal students, all of whom did not necessarily see themselves as writers, but felt successful on the assignment nonetheless, was intended to learn how the students could use writing success to build their “academic literacy identities” despite their “below basic” and “basic” labels from standardized tests. While she and the teacher whose class she studied were concerned that this type of writing or response to literature may not be “tested,” it did help the students succeed on the particular writing task being studied.

While Avila’s case study does not address digital writing tools and focuses on students engaged in a mostly traditional literary response, Wolsey & Grisham’s (2012) work is much more relevant to my own research because it does focus on the use of digital tools. Both, however, share a common theme: When students are able to write about their experiences either in or out of the classroom, their writing has the potential to be transformative in terms of constructing knowledge or identity. And, according to Wolsey and Grisham, “rapidly evolving digital technologies…present new opportunities and new challenges for our millennial-generation writers. Adolescents form personal and social identities throughout middle and high school, and the millennial generation illustrates this through the social networking tools they use. [They] may partially construct these identities in a writing community. More important, technology can help with content-learning task and identity construction” (p.xiv). In their chapter titled “Why Writing is a Process, and How Technology Can Help,” Wolsey and Grisham explain that when students are “challenged with knowledge transforming tasks” instead of those writing tasks that simply require them to tell what they have just learned, students will “become comfortable with the back and forth of writing that means that the first draft may not be the best one” (p.xiv). When writing tasks are carefully crafted in a way that steers clear of “knowledge telling,” students are more inclined to participate in the editing and revision process. Furthermore, “writing is more engaging when the author has access to useful feedback” (p.39). This comfort with the feedback and editing process can then have the capacity to increase student confidence because there is not merely one correct way to express one’s thoughts, and not merely one correct answer. Wolsey and Grisham caution that “the cognitive work required in transforming knowledge through writing is difficult and challenging,” (p.40), but they also assure that “student proficiency develops with time.” Digital tools allow for copious feedback at multiple points in the writing process from both peers and teacher, further lowering student anxiety by emphasizing the “draft” nature of the students texts.

Incorporating and utilizing digital writing tools in the ELA classroom requires an understanding of and comfort with utilizing the many opportunities for response and feedback during the writing process. Teng (2012) in an article published in *Voices from the Middle* notes that technology can “expedite” the feedback that good writing requires. He explains that “the comments, feedback, shoutouts, and general response from others, typically their friends, are what have students rushing home to check their email notifications” (p.36). His remarks underscore the fact that our students are highly interested in audience, but it is an interest that cannot be sustained if writing is only done for the teacher. Teng’s article focuses on his school’s launch of a Facebook-like social network to be used in an attempt to improve student writing. He notes that for students “writing informally online provided them a freedom that they rarely had in classes. Voice mattered. Response mattered” (p.34). He goes on to explain that in the language arts classroom it would be best to consider social network postings as pre-writing activities, and that we are still tasked with helping students move from pre-writing to polished drafts. It seems, however, that these social network opportunities may be a powerful way to help build student confidence and enthusiasm for more formal writing tasks.

While Teng’s work focuses on the opportunities for using the ways students already write to enhance and increase student writing for academic purposes, Murphy and Lebans (2008) investigated the positive impact of the use of Web 2.0 tools in the secondary school classroom. Part of their research focused on the benefits realized by English learner and immigrant student populations. Specifically, teachers of these target populations reported that student enthusiasm and engagement was greatly enhanced and they were “gratified by the impact…of Web 2.0 tools on written literacy and student attitudes to language use” (142). Specific improvement was noticed for students who would not have ordinarily participated in a class discussion, but did so in online blogs and other forums. Student writing was carefully crafted, and it also provided an opportunity for the teacher to identify and target specific areas of writing difficulty and plan and deliver instruction appropriately.

Grabill and Hicks (2005) in their article published in *English Education,* offer a basis for including Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in teacher preparation courses. They argue that if the goal of teacher preparation courses is to help students be more effective writers, then those courses will have to envision the purpose and process of writing in the same ways that students do. Furthermore, within the realm of the internet emerging social and cultural spaces and literacies are rapidly evolving, underscoring the need for and importance of preparing pre-service and in-service teachers for not just planning “technology-rich literacy activities” for their own students, but they too must participate in these activities and the spaces they create. What it means to be literate is changing, and teacher education and training needs to prepare us to participate in this change.

Teaching and supporting writing in the English/Language Arts classroom can no longer be about the basics of subject, purpose, and audience. It is clear from the research that today’s adolescents need writing tasks with which they can engage on a personal level as their own emerging identities evolve and change. While writing needs to have an academic focus and purpose in terms of content knowledge development, it can and should be a means of articulating one’s personal identity within the larger context created and supported by the material being studied. Furthermore, it is not enough to simply incorporate technology into daily lessons. While in the more traditional sense technology is a tool by which students create written products, it is also the means by which our digital natives introduce their narratives to the “real world,” inviting the scrutiny of peers and teacher, so it must intersect with the larger social and cultural milieu in which our students find and place themselves. Ultimately, I am hopeful that the use of digital writing tools will increase the enthusiasm, confidence, and resiliency of my students for academic writing tasks.

**Research Methods**

It is quite common for students at my school site to not complete required academic writing tasks. My colleagues and I often (perhaps erroneously) assume that students lack access to technology, either can’t or don’t access support from teachers, tutors, or family members, or that the task of academic writing simply isn’t interesting or important to them. What is needed, however, is research into this problem, so that we can better serve our students and help them become confident and effective academic writers.

My study was designed to investigate what barriers students experience when faced with academic writing tasks and addressed the following formal research question: How can the use of digital writing tools improve the confidence, enthusiasm, and resiliency of students who struggle with writing tasks?

**Participants**

The participants in my study were six tenth graders and five ninth graders. Of the tenth graders, three are female, and three are male. Of the ninth graders, three are male, and two are female. All participants are Hispanic/Latino, and none speak English in their homes or outside of school; however, all but one have been students in our district since kindergarten. Students self-selected into a newly created “High School Writing Support” class midway through the semester. They were interviewed about their interest in joining the class once it had been reported by their core English teachers that they either had or were in the process of failing a major writing assignment.

Out of all the participants, only two (10th grade boys) were able to demonstrate that they had actually tried to succeed on the writing from their English class, as they were able to produce multiple drafts for inspection by me. The others simply explained that for a variety of reasons they had not completed any writing assignments yet. In addition, all but the two boys mentioned previously, scored “below basic” or “far below basic” on the Writing Strategies strand of the California Standards Test for 2012. Table 1 provides a summary of the students’ English/Language Arts STAR results by content cluster. The first row of the table provides the percent of questions one would need to answer correctly in order to be designated proficient in the cluster area. Rows two and three provide the average percent of questions answered correctly by cluster disaggregated for the ninth and tenth grade study participants. The average of questions answered correctly on the Writing Strategies portion of the test was 31% for the ninth graders, and 43% for the tenth graders.

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| Table 1  *Participants’ 2012 STAR Test Percent Correct by Content Cluster* | | | | | |
| Cluster | Vocabulary Development | Reading Comprehension | Literary Analysis | Written Conventions | Writing Strategies |
| % Correct, CA “Minimally Proficient” | 67% | 68% | 63% | 66% | 57% |
| % Correct Study Participants (9th Grade) | 51% | 56% | 45% | 55% | 31% |
| % Correct Study Participants (10th Grade) | 33% | 49% | 50% | 54% | 43% |

**Procedures**

The data for my study is the result of an initial student survey, student work sample evaluation, interviews, and a final survey. These various sources allowed for data polyangulation in an effort to improve validity (Mertler, 2006).

I began my research by administering an anonymous online survey created using Google Forms so that I could better understand student experiences with academic writing tasks, as well as understand the students’ access to and use of various web 2.0 technologies (see Appendix A). An “invitation” to participate was sent to each student via their Gmail account, and students were encouraged to take their time and respond thoughtfully and given adequate time in class to complete the survey. In addition to allowing students to select the various electronic devices they use and how they use them, the survey also asked students to use rating scales regarding their confidence levels, beliefs about how to improve as a writer, and beliefs about relevance of the writing tasks assigned in school. Ten of the eleven students participating in the study completed the initial survey. I then used the Google Forms Summary feature to analyze the results of the survey. This feature calculates the percentages of responses for all of the various question types.

During the four week study I introduced the students to various Web 2.0 tools that they were then required to use in order to create something to share with the class. For example, students used VoiceThread to create narratives about themselves, they used Edmodo to respond daily to a “Quote of the Day,” (see Appendix B) and they used Glogster to make “posters” that represented some important aspect of their identities. In addition, the students entered in-progress essays for their English classes into Google Docs, where they were able to share those drafts with me and classmates in order to obtain feedback.

The student work produced using the various Web 2.0 tools was collected and evaluated to determine if students had met the requirements of the various assignments, as well as to attempt to ascertain whether or not the tools had been useful in increasing student confidence and enthusiasm. Work products were also discussed with students in order to understand student perceptions of those products and the helpfulness of the tools they had used to create them.

During the last week of the study I interviewed two students regarding their experiences with writing for school, and whether or not they found the Web 2.0 tools and various activities we did useful (see Appendix C).

Finally, at the end of my study, I performed another survey of the students’ attitudes and beliefs about the tools we had used, assignments they had performed, and their level of confidence in completing writing tasks (see Appendix D). I again used Google Forms, sent digital invitations to the students’ Gmail accounts, and provided adequate class time for the students to respond honestly and thoughtfully. All eleven students participated in the final survey.

**Data Analysis**

Using polyangulation of multiple data sources allowed me account for validity and reliability (Mertler, 2006). This enabled me to analyze my data in an effort to better understand the students’ attitudes and beliefs, as well as the efficacy of the Web 2.0 tools utilized in an attempt to increase student enthusiasm, confidence, and resiliency.

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| Table 2  *Data Matrix* | | | | |
| Research Question | Data Source 1 | Data Source 2 | Data Source 3 | Data Source 4 |
| How can the use of digital writing tools improve the confidence, enthusiasm, and resiliency of students who struggle with writing tasks? | Initial Survey: Students responded to a variety of questions regarding their confidence with writing and access to and use of technology. | Student work samples were collected and evaluated for student confidence in producing written products. | Student Interviews: Students responded to a variety of questions regarding their interest in and confidence with writing tasks, as well as their use of Web 2.0 tools. | Final Survey: Students responded to a variety of questions about the Web 2.0 tools they used during the study, and how these tools impacted their confidence as writers |

Using the Google Form feature of Google Drive allowed me to gather both quantitative and qualitative data for surveys. Both types of data are analyzed and reported through the application’s summary of responses feature, reporting back the percentage of students who chose each of the possible responses.

Qualitative data in the form of student work samples was analyzed in a variety of ways. Formal essays written for the students’ English classes was reviewed based on the final grade assigned by their English instructor. Student work produced using Web 2.0 tools for the writing support class was analyzed in terms of the amount, detail, and level of sophistication of the writing. I was also able to analyze the students’ revision of their writing after they had received written feedback from peers and me through Google Docs’ “comment” feature.

The data collected during my research provides useful information for unraveling the very real obstacles to student writing success, as well as how Web 2.0 tools can be used to increase student enthusiasm, confidence, and resiliency for writing. Collecting data from four different sources allowed for polyangulation, which helps to improve validity of the study (Mertler, 2006). The results of my data analysis including student attitudes and beliefs about their use of technology, as well as their confidence regarding not just writing, but their ability to improve as writers, are discussed in the findings section of this paper.

**Findings**

## **Initial Survey**

Analysis of the initial survey revealed that eighty-nine percent of the respondents report that they have access to a computer and internet at home and 78% report using that computer and connectivity for doing homework. Less than half of the students (44%) reported using technology at home for research, but only 22% reported using it for gaming. Seventy-eight percent did report that they regularly use Facebook, and the clear majority of students (89%), indicated that they use their connectivity at home for either listening to or downloading music.

None of the students reported feeling confident about writing, and 90% of the students believed it was important to use teacher feedback during the writing process; however only 20% believed it was important to use peer feedback. Sixty percent believed that writing is an important skill that can help them be successful in life.

Eighty percent of the students reported that they usually procrastinate when faced with a writing task, with the same percent reporting that they sometimes don’t complete writing tasks at all. Additionally, 80% reported that they often feel as though writing assignments are unrelated to their lives.

Seventy percent of the students reported that they believed the writing class would help them with their writing, but only 40% were at all confident that digital writing tools would help them.

## **Descriptions of Various Writing Tasks**

**Responding to Quote of the Day (QOD) using Edmodo.** As a daily warm-up activity, students retrieved their Chrome Books©, logged in to their Edmodo accounts, and began responding to the QOD prompt. Students were to paraphrase, interpret, and evaluate the quote and responses were to be completed by no more than 10 minutes after the tardy bell. This served the purpose of focusing the students for the day’s lessons and activities much in the same way “bell work” is traditionally used, but with the added benefit that students were given an opportunity to personally respond to often complex quotations from authors as diverse as Tupac Shakur and George Bernard Shaw. Students were eager to have me read their responses aloud to the class, even though the Edmodo format enabled all students to see everyone else’s responses. The work was challenging for students at first, as they struggled to paraphrase the quotes, but over time they became more comfortable with this step of the process, and began to see how putting the quote in their own words made the remaining two tasks easier.

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| Figure 1  *Edmodo Student Responses to Teacher Posted QOD* |

Figure 1 demonstrates the level of complexity involved in paraphrasing, interpreting, and analyzing the QOD. It also demonstrates that students took the task seriously, and carefully considered their responses. While some students were awkward or unpolished in their responses, most on most days succeeded in relating to and gleaning meaning from the QOD. Because the quotes can be thematic in nature, it also provided an opportunity for students to focus on small bites of information related to a focus theme. In other words, if asked to interpret and evaluate a larger piece of text, most of these particular students would have resisted the task, but because the passages were short, and the format for response was more social in nature (i.e. the Edmodo “news feed”) students generally completed the assignment within the allotted time. On several occasions students actually revised their own responses after having viewed the replies of their peers even though this was not part of the assignment.

Because the final evaluative portion of the QOD assignment invites students to discuss the quote’s importance, it allows the students to make the personal connection highlighted in my literature review. This, in turn, makes the writing task relevant and meaningful for the students. The three student work samples all end with an assertion that communicating effectively is important if you want to be understood. The last student’s claim that “you need speaking to write,” is probably her attempt to underscore the importance of something she’s confident about—her ability to speak—and its role in producing good writing.

**Creating Posters at Gloster to reveal some aspect of their personality.** Because of the graphical nature of Glogster, the students did not necessarily see this as a “writing task.”

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| Figure 2  *Student Glogster Poster on an Important Aspect of His Identity* |

The student who prepared the Glogster poster in Figure 2 was delighted to have an opportunity to create a poster showcasing the differences between soccer and American football. He even included a video clip of a famous British comic joking about the differences. If you simply asked this student what was important to him, he would say “soccer!” And if you asked why he would likely say “it just is,” but given an opportunity to collect images and a video, he decided on his own to write narrative pieces for his poster that would help the viewer understand the differences between the two sports. When questioned about all the writing, he simply responded “I had to explain things, so I had to write.” Writing, in this case and for this student, became a means to an end. It had a very concrete purpose and was necessary for accurately and adequately sharing his passion for soccer with me and his classmates. This particular student is very confident about his soccer skills, and for this particular assignment chose to use his least confident means of expression (writing) in order to share what is important to him with his audience.

**Creating narrated slide-shows at VoiceThread to help the teacher and classmates understand who they are.** VoiceThread was by far the most enjoyed Web 2.0 tool that we used over the course of the study. Because VoiceThread allows for effortless creation of a slide show, the students spent hours combing through images in an effort to find just the right picture to represent some aspect of their identity. It took several days for the students to complete the visual elements of their presentation, and as I expected, they were not as enthusiastic about recording their voices for the narration. When I questioned them during observation, they revealed they were uncomfortable with the way their voices sounded in a recording, and they would get frustrated when they lost their place while recording. Several students took my suggestion to type up their narration so that they could read it into the microphone. Others opted to actually type their narration into the comment option so that they wouldn’t have to speak. One of the students, however, was so comfortable with the speaking into the microphone feature, that he quickly figured out how to use his smart phone to add narration to his VoiceThread so that he could continue to work on his narration even if it meant hiding in the bathroom at his house to finish the night before his presentation was due. This particular student is very confident in his soccer abilities and very proud of his athletic accomplishments. He stayed on task, included more slides than required, and his narration was thoughtful and engaging. His ability to make a personal connection to the assignment enabled him to feel and be successful.

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| Figure 3  *Student VoiceThread “My Thirteen Exciting Years of Playing Soccer”* |

**Using Google Docs for peer and teacher feedback.** Throughout the study participating students were encouraged to share essays for their English classes with me and their writing support class peers in order to get feedback for editing and revision. To guide this feedback activity, I required that the reviewing peer make two comments that began with the words “I like,” and two comments that began with the words “I wonder.” I borrowed this protocol from the Buck Institute’s “Critical Friends Protocol” for meaningful critique and feedback. While it is interesting that in Figure 4 the student changed her beginning in response to my “I like” comment, the end result is a marked improvement over her original opening statement. It is entirely possible that she really had nothing to say about learning to swim, but my comment about connecting to her own life experience, helped her make a connection to another more substantial experience in her life.

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| Figure 4  *Student Essay Shared Via Google Docs with Teacher Feedback*  First Draft    Second Draft |

In the first draft work sample, the opening sentence makes clear that the student had been instructed to begin with some sort of personal connection to get the reader’s attention. She states “Through the years and with a lot of practice, I started to get better at swimming,” but because she doesn’t develop the idea or provide a transition into her discussion of the short story she is to analyze, it does not create the “hook” she’d hoped for, nor does it really reveal anything interesting or important about her. In speaking with the student it was also clear that she really had no idea why she was doing this, or how it would help her craft her introduction. Once she understood that her “personal connection” should in some way be related to the lesson that the protagonist learns, she crafted the improved opening. While no conclusions can be drawn, it seems plausible that her revision demonstrates increased resiliency, as it involved accepting and incorporating feedback that was somewhat significant in that it required her to rethink her connection to the text being analyzed.

**Interviews**

When conducting student interviews I chose to interview the two ninth grade female students who were failing my ninth grade English class. Both students reported that they always struggle to begin and never complete writing assignments for their English or other classes. One reported that all assignments lacked relevance for her and writing just didn’t seem important given everything else she has going on in her life. The other reported that she can never figure out what to say so she can never get started. When I pressed her and asked about the notes we had taken relative to the writing task, the worksheets we had completed, and the various pre-writing activities, she told me that she just doesn’t think about her feelings, beliefs, or opinions in English. If something is important or relevant to her she both thinks about it and speaks about it in Spanish. Furthermore, she stated that if she could respond to her English assignments in Spanish, she felt she could be more successful, even though it would require that she translate everything we did in class in order to prepare to respond. This particular student has attended school in our district since third grade, but she reports feeling limited in her ability to express herself in the English language and would prefer to do so in Spanish.

Both students reported that they enjoyed learning to use the Web 2.0 tools, and they particularly liked Glogster and VoiceThread because they enjoyed using images to express themselves. They also reported that they found it very helpful to use a social networking site such as Edmodo where they didn’t have to worry about the “rules of writing.” They enjoyed being able to express themselves without fear of failure.

These particular students are often off task in all of their classes, and are frequently referred to the office for discipline ranging from “defiance of authority” to failure to complete assignments, and persistent tardiness. These opportunities to express themselves kept them engaged and on task, and neither of the students were tardy to class during the study.

**Final Survey**

Students were again asked to respond to a Google Form survey at the end of the four week study. The survey was accessed online by all eleven participants, and they were given class time to complete the survey.

In response to questions about the web 2.0 tools they had experienced in the class, students were generally positive. Sixty percent of the students reported that they believed Web 2.0 tools helped them learn better, and 70% believed Web 2.0 tools were helping them to become better writers (a 30% increase from the initial survey). The same percentage indicated that they wished web 2.0 tools were in use in all of their academic classes.

Regarding the use of Edmodo to complete their QOD, only 55% of students reported “liking” Edmodo, but 73% reported that they liked QOD, and 64% reported that this daily warm-up has made them feel more confident in their writing skills.

The tool that allowed for the most freedom from actually writing, VoiceThread, was by far the most popular, with 73% of students reporting that performing assignments via VoiceThread was “easier than writing them.”

**Discussion and Implications**

In order to be considered “proficient” in a California ninth or tenth grade English language arts class, students must be able to perform both an aesthetic evaluation and an historical analysis of imaginative literature (O'Malley, 1999). These literary analysis standards do not require or even invite students to make a personal connection to the texts, and neither do the newly adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010). For students who do not enjoy reading, evaluating, or analyzing literature, there is little opportunity for enthusiasm, engagement, or making meaning from the writing tasks that may be assigned to measure proficiency on these standards. Perhaps that is why it is so common for students to not complete (or even begin) these types of writing assignments. If teachers are not thoughtful and creative in developing writing prompts, there is no opportunity for students to respond on a more personal, and therefore meaningful, level. Furthermore, when curriculum is tightly focused on these literary analysis standards, and students either do not or only superficially respond, we have lost an opportunity to develop the writing skills we know our students will need in order to be successful in their future educational, professional, and personal endeavors. The ability to articulate one’s thoughts and opinions successfully in writing requires practice and deep engagement, which in turn has the capacity to help us not only communicate with others more effectively, but also helps us more fully understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

The students in my study actively resisted completing the essays they were assigned in their English classes. At the same time, however, they wrote every day in the writing support class. As mentioned earlier, they experienced only marginal gains on their formal writing assessments, but they did work diligently on revising their drafts when they were able to obtain supportive feedback from me and their peers, although they were rarely able to sustain an extended revision and editing session without continuous encouragement and prompting from me.

Ensuring that students are able to have a personal connection to their writing tasks, however, is only a starting place. If we want our students to feel and be successful, we must take into account the ways and places they are already using writing to communicate and express themselves. The results of my study suggest that taking advantage of “low risk” social networking environments, as well as tools that allow students to incorporate various elements of multimedia, has the potential for building student enthusiasm, confidence, and resiliency when faced with academic writing tasks.

While my study is certainly limited in depth and scope, given the short time frame in which it was conducted, the small sample size, and the fact that the participants self-selected into the elective class, I have learned a great deal from this experience and the experiences of the students. During my last four years of teaching, I have focused entirely on standards and preparing students for benchmark exams and the STAR test. The writing tasks I was provided by the consultants hired to increase achievement at our school did not invite students to make a personal connection in their writing, but rather focused on demonstration of an understanding of the standards being assessed. While I have often seen myself as a teacher who connects with and respects students, I had lost sight of the most important reason for me to be a teacher—helping my students navigate the complexities of adolescence while forming their identities. I have used Facebook for many years now as a means of staying in touch with 300+ former students, but it had not occurred to me that I could incorporate a similar tool (Edmodo) into my writing instruction. Having done so, I can readily see the power of allowing my “digital natives” to use these powerful tools for which they already have an affinity to strengthen their existing writing skills as well as acquire new skills.

Since concluding my study I have begun incorporating the Quote of the Day activity into my benchmark English classes. The students enthusiastically respond, and in just two weeks I can already see improvement in their ability to analyze, interpret, and evaluate these short but complex narratives. Even the reluctant writers in these classes seem to have no trouble sinking their teeth into these smaller writing tasks, and I am hopeful that I will be able to build upon these successes in the near future when I assign an essay. Because I have writing samples for all of the students in my benchmark classes, I will be able to compare these upcoming writing assignments to previous ones to get a sense of any improvement. Also, because the students don’t seem the least bit hesitant about beginning a response on Edmodo, I’m working on prompts for them to respond to that would help them create the various parts of an essay assignment. My thinking is that perhaps, if the writing could be done in smaller pieces as Edmodo posts, the students will not feel as overwhelmed by the writing task and less likely to procrastinate to the point of never starting at all. I am also looking forward to introducing them to Glogster and VoiceThread as response options for the novel that we are currently reading. Either of these tools can be used to assess student achievement on various standards for which my students and I are held accountable.

I am also anxious to share the results of the study with my colleagues. I am interested in their assessment of the study as well as what they perceive to be the implications for future work within our department. I wholeheartedly believe that working together as a department we can improve our writing instruction and the experiences of our students, and I am hopeful that by using digital writing tools to build student confidence, enthusiasm, and resiliency we can enjoy with our students the amazing transformations that can occur when students can effectively express themselves and the knowledge that they have gained in our classes.

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**Appendix A**

# **Initial Survey on Technology Use & Attitudes About Writing**

Your responses to the following survey questions will help me understand what challenges you face when you have to write for school. Please answer the questions honestly. I'm not here to judge you, I'm here to help you, and I can do that better if I know how you really feel.

Top of Form

**Please indicate which electronic devices you have and know how to use**

Mark all that apply.

 Smart Phone

 iPad

 Laptop

 iPod

 Desktop Computer

 Other: 

**Do you have internet access at home?**

 Yes

 No

**Please give me some information on the ways you use electronic devices and the internet.**

You may choose as many as you like.

 Facebook

 Gaming

 Music

 Homework

 Blogging

 Email

 Research

 Other including social networks: 

**Confidence About Writing**

Please indicate how confident you feel about your writing ability.

 Very Confident

 Somewhat Confident

 Not Confident

**Beliefs About Ability to Improve Writing Skills**

Please check all the boxes that apply to your beliefs about being able to improve your writing.

 I believe some people are good writers and some aren't.

 I believe I can only be good if I'm writing about something that interests me.

 I believe there are certain skills anyone can learn that will make them a better writer.

 I believe using a computer can improve my writing.

 I believe it is important to use teacher feedback to improve my writing.

 I believe it is important to use peer feedback to improve my writing.

 I believe writing is a waste of my time.

 I believe writing is an important skill that will help me be successful.

 I believe I could enjoy writing if I felt more confident.

 I believe writing about a subject (e.g. history, literature, science) is a good way to help me learn that subject.

 I believe too much emphasis is placed on writing.

 I believe being able to write well will help me in my future career.

 I believe being able to write well will help me in my personal life.

**How often do you procrastinate when you have a writing assignment?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Often |  |  |  |  |  | Never |

**How often do you get help from a teacher when you have a writing assignment?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Often |  |  |  |  |  | Never |

**How often do you not complete a writing assignment?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Often |  |  |  |  |  | Never |

**How often do you feel writing assignments are unrelated to your life?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Often |  |  |  |  |  | Never |

**How often do you feel writing assignments are meaningful for you?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Often |  |  |  |  |  | Never |

**How confident are you that this writing class is going to help you with your writing?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Confident |  |  |  |  |  | Not Confident |

**How confident are you that using technology will help you with your writing?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Confident |  |  |  |  |  | Not Confident |

# **Appendix B**

# **Quote of the Day Example Assignment**

*"If at first you don't succeed, dust yourself off and try again." ~Aaliyah*

**Say:** Put the quote in your own words. What is Aliyah basically saying? Don't forget the "dust yourself off" part -- it's the most important part of the quote.

**Mean:** What does this quote mean to you? Be specific and explain what each part of the quote means.

**Matter:** Why is the quote important? Why does it matter to you? Why should it matter to anyone?

Your response should be a complete paragraph with five to seven sentences to adequately respond.

# **Appendix C**

**Student Attitudes About Writing Interview Questions**

1. Describe your experiences with writing.
   1. Describe a time you struggled to begin or complete a writing assignment.
      1. What prevented you from beginning the assignment?
      2. What prevented you from completing the assignment?
2. Describe how you have used peer feedback prior to the Writing Support Class?
   1. Worksheets?
   2. Partner discussions?
   3. Did you find the feedback useful in improving your writing?
      1. Why or why not?
3. Describe how you have used teacher feedback prior to the Writing Support Class?
   1. Did you receive feedback on an initial draft before you had to submit a final draft?
      1. Why or why not?
   2. Did you find the feedback useful in improving your writing?
      1. Why or why not?
4. What do you expect or want from teacher or peer feedback?
   1. Grammar, Spelling & Mechanics?
   2. Content?
   3. Suggestions for revision to achieve clarity and precision?
5. What has been your favorite digital writing tool in this class and why?
6. Has your confidence for writing increased because you have used digital tools?
7. Do you see yourself using digital tools in the future to help with writing tasks?
8. Do you believe we should begin using digital tools school-wide?
   1. Why or why not?
9. Do you believe writing is an essential part of learning?
   1. Why or why not?
10. Is it helpful to have a writing forum, such as your blog or Edmodo, where you are not being evaluated on the “rules of writing,” but rather on the ideas that you express in writing?
    1. Why or why not?

# **Appendix D**

# **Final Survey on Technology Use & Attitudes About Writing**

Please help me understand how I can use Web 2.0 tools to support your writing improvement next year by honestly and thoroughly answering the following questions.

**Top of Form**

**Google Docs**

Please indicate which aspects of Google Docs you found most useful this semester.

 Spelling suggest/correct

 Sharing with a friend for feedback

 Sharing with a teacher for feedback

 Being able to access my documents anywhere with an internet connection

 Being able to print anywhere

**Edmodo**

Let me know what you think of using Edmodo for some class assignments. Check all that you agree with.

 I like Edmodo

 Doing assignments on Edmodo is easier than writing them

 I just worry about what I say, not so much about spelling and grammar

 I do not like Edmodo

 I wish more assignments could be on Edmodo

 I feel confident when I work on assignments on Edmodo

 Edmodo feels like a waste of time to me

 I like being able to see what other people post to assignments on Edmodo

**Voice Thread**

Let me know what you think of using Voice Thread for some class assignments. Check all that you agree with.

 I like Voice Thread

 Doing assignments on Voice Thread is easier than writing them

 I just worry about what I say, not so much about spelling and grammar

 I do not like Voice Thread

 I wish more assignments could be on Voice Thread

 I feel confident when I work on assignments on Voice Thread

 Voice Thread feels like a waste of time to me

 Being able to comment with my voice, rather than writing, was helpful to me

**Quote of the Day**

Let me know what you think of Quote of the Day. Check all that you agree with.

 I like QOD

 QODs are easy because I just have to say what I feel.

 I just worry about what I say, not so much about spelling and grammar

 I do not like QOD

 QOD has made me feel more confident with my analysis skills.

 QOD has made me feel more confident with my writing skills.

 I like reading what other people's analysis of the QODs

 Being able to see what other people say on QODs helps me do better

 Practicing with QODs has made it easier for me to write essays for my English class

**Using Web 2.0 Tools (Glogster, Voice Thread, Google Docs, Edmodo)**

Let me know what you think of using Web 2.0 tools in general. Check all that you agree with.

 Web 2.0 tools are cool!

 I believe Web 2.0 tools help me learn better.

 I believe Web 2.0 tools are helping me become a better writer.

 I think Web 2.0 tools should be used in all academic classes.

 Web 2.0 tools haven't made a difference for me.

 Web 2.0 tools are distracting and get me off task.

 Web 2.0 tools are confusing and frustrating.