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The Problem

Literacy is one of the most important skills that schools provide students. The ability to write clearly, fluently, and with a specific purpose in mind is a major component in literacy learning. As adults, we know the importance of being able to communicate appropriately through written (typed) words. As my students partake in the world of 21st Century learning, it is essential that middle school students be able to write fluently now and in the future. If they plan to attend college, secure employment, or send emails to customers and/or co-workers, written communication will need to be a skill they are adept to handle. However, even as I stress the need for writing skills, students do not see the relevancy to their everyday lives. Middle school students in my classes lack engagement, effort, and ownership over their writing. This is mainly due to the lack of choice, authentic audience, and relevancy to their lives outside of school.

At my school, literacy skills such as reading and writing drive the lesson planning of all subjects. It is expected all teachers will incorporate abundant amounts of reading, writing, and discussion in their subjects. Our school believes if students are able to successfully read and communicate orally and through writing, they will thrive in almost any subject and any future endeavor. While this is a worthy and important goal, students are directed on how and what to write in almost all classes, not just in Language Arts. Additionally, writing has become a serious focus of our school as students have struggled to show growth the past few years on the statewide assessment ISTEP. In order to prepare for this assessment, students must complete quarterly writing prompts. They neither enjoy these prompts, nor do they understand the importance of them. Students are unable to choose their own topics or genres for these prompts, only fueling their dislike for writing.

In short, the majority of my students despise writing and often fail to see the importance of the lessons related to writing. When students are not interested in what they are supposed to be learning, and they do not

see the relevancy to their lives outside of school, compliance and lackluster effort will be the outcome at best.

The Technological Solution

The implementation of blogging in the classroom could be a viable solution to the issues mentioned above. Blogs are mostly simple (but have potential to be elaborate) websites where anyone with access to the Internet can write and share their ideas on a regular basis. Blogs allow for readers to interact and communicate with the author through commenting. All of a sudden, a typically solitary art becomes interactive and can be collaborative. Blogs allow everyday writers to have a worldwide voice and connect with others both near and far. If students are given the freedom to write about a topic of their choice, even while adhering to writing standards and expectations, they will have the chance to substantially widen their audience and find writing can be engaging if it is about a topic they truly find interesting. Blogging in this manner would also allow for more student-directed learning. Additionally, it will open up many opportunities for teaching about Digital Citizenship, the need to write using a formal, yet easy-to-read manner, and the importance of revising and editing before submission. One of the most beneficial aspects of blogs is writing can be shared instantly. Middle school students today live in a world where things are instantaneous - texting, social media communications, quick and easy downloads. Blogging would help students connect this desire for instant communication with a necessary and useful skill. Rather than making blogging the sole focus of the implementations (the tool), the goal would be improvement in student engagement, achievement, and success in writing (the goal). Instead of being the goal, blogs would be a means to reach that goal (Katz, 2001).

Probably one of the most beneficial aspects of blogs is that most blogging platforms are free! Sites like Blogger, WordPress, EduBlogs, LiveJournal, and KidBlog offer user friendly tools that do not cost a dime. Writers wanting to create their own blogs will only need an email address to sign up. Some educational blogs for younger students can be set up by classroom teachers, without the need for young children to have a personal email address. Fortunately in my school district, all students have access to a MacBook computer as we are a 1:1 school corporation. This personal access to a computers would make blogging feasible without

incurring extra costs for devices with the ability to access the Internet and with word processing applications. Depending on the quality of blogging students and teachers intend to do (including pictures, videos, audio files) there may be a possible need for access to digital cameras and microphones that are not built into the MacBooks. Luckily, a digital camera with high-quality image production can be purchased for under \$100. Well-built microphones can also be purchased for about \$100. These items could be shared amongst classes and students; there would be no need to purchase one for every classroom or every teacher.

One last positive aspect of implementing blogs is the need for only very little training for teachers. Most blogs are user friendly, and are considered “what-you-see-is-what-you-get.” Training teachers on the the basic and some of the advanced functions could take place before or after school in short mini-lessons to avoid paying for substitutes during the school day. This could be done by the technology staff in our corporation, to avoid added costs. Also, new bloggers can find endless numbers of tutorials, tips, and walkthroughs on YouTube. Again, these help keep the cost of blogging free to very low.

Funding Solution

As previously mentioned, all students in my classes have access to a MacBook computer. The computers come equipped with built-in cameras and microphones that work well for medium-to-low quality digital images and audio/video creation. There would be no need to invest in additional computers or devices that can access the Internet. Also, there are numerous easy-to-use blogging platforms that are free once users create an account using only an email address. Because of these factors, using blogs with students would essentially be free.

The only cost that could possibly arise is if the teachers and students decide to purchase higher-quality digital cameras and microphones. In the case of my school, purchasing a very nice camera/recorder and microphone to be shared within each grade level (6th, 7th, 8th) would cost no more than \$600. Depending on the digital cameras being purchased, the cost could be as low as \$400. One of the best ways to fund small, but necessary solutions is by creating a request using the website Donor’s Choose. A teacher or administrator

could easily post the needs of the school and persuade others to donate to the cause. While this may not be a quick, instant fix, in the long run, teachers and students could gain access to high-quality technology tools with little leg work involved.

Lastly, since blogs are so user friendly and prevalently used, there would not need to be any paid teacher training. Luckily, we have a middle school e-Learning coach and many tech savvy teachers who currently blog for reasons other than work. To help train additional teachers on how to use blogs, their basic and advanced functions, and the privacy issues that can come along with posting to the internet, would be no added cost. And let's not forget the slew of YouTube videos created by educators for educators about what blogs are, how to comment, and ways in which the functions of blogs work. Again, this would incur no extra costs. As teachers have questions about their specific blogging platform, they could reach out the technology staff, search the internet, or even ask the students (some will learn new tips and tricks faster than the teachers will!).

Implementation Path

Because of the heavy amount of teacher-directed writing middle school students are forced to take part in at my school, they have learned to detest anything related to writing. The combination of massive amounts of writing done in all classes, required quarterly writing prompts, and the lack of student choice in writing has caused students to turn their back on a necessary 21st Century skill. Not only are they unengaged, but they see little relevance to the academic writing done in school to the way they interact with literacy skills in their personal lives. Blogs would give students a chance to expand their authentic audience on a worldwide level, making their writing seem more relevant and important. Weblogs also encourage students to collaborate, edit and revise carefully, and communicate about the writing even after it's been posted. Through commenting, students can return to the ideas, expand their thinking, and interact with others who have similar interests. In many ways, blogging would help middle school students find a place for academically based writing in the digital world they are so familiar with. Knowing that students were much more engaged and interesting in their writing tasks and

took more ownership over the quality of their writing would be great incentive for many educators who teach writing. These positive aspects would motivate and inspire both teachers and students which satisfy the desire to feel successful, and eventually allow for growth and change (Kotter, 1990).

Even though many teenagers are considered to be “digital natives,” most middle schoolers have not “blogged” before. It will be important to not only reinforce the writing skills learned throughout the school year, but also to show them how to create, manage, and edit a blog site. Students will need direction on how to narrow a topic of their choice so that it is feasible to blog about until the end of the school year. As the students continue to blog, they will need lessons on how to appropriately and lawfully use images, videos, links, and other such media. Additionally, there may need to be more instruction on how to effectively peer edit others’ writing in order to make it “bloggable,” or ready to present to a wide audience who expects high quality, grammatically correct work.

In order for teachers to successfully implement blogging into their classrooms, the first step would be to read and visit many different blogs themselves. By viewing different authors’ ways of writing, how they set up their blogs, and even what they blog about would help give teachers a better sense of what a blog is or can be. In order to really prepare for such an implementation, teachers should blog themselves! Teachers should create accounts and try different blogging platforms to see which one would best fit their expectations and the needs of their students. By playing around with and eventually using a blog themselves, teachers would have the personal experience needed to model proper blogging skills. Also, teachers would want to know how to comment on other blogs, understand the privacy rights and settings of the blogging platforms, and permission rights given by parents for their children to post information on the Internet. And some useful, but not necessary skills needed for writing that many blogs incorporate: embedding, linking, and uploading of outside websites, media, or documents. Each of these steps should be implemented through well-timed additions of information and pacing of work. If true adaptive change is expected of the teachers (and students), it must be realized that “people can learn only so much so fast” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

While these essential skills could be daunting to teachers at first, the positive incentives due to students blogging could easily far outweigh educator's initial reservations. There is a substantial amount of research that shows blogging can greatly increase student engagement in the writing process. Studies have also shown students' abilities to collaborate, revise and edit writing, and use more formal, academic language increases when they are given the chance to share their voice with a more authentic (and unfamiliar) audience. In many ways, teachers would be surprised at how much improvement and growth students' writing will show after they have begun blogging.

There are a few aspects of blogging that should be considered before implementing. One major concern should be for student privacy and safety. In my school, it would be necessary to find out which students were or were not allowed to post their work, pictures, names on the Internet. Luckily, most parents authorize this type of work at the beginning of the year. Another element to consider is whether or not students have access to the Internet at home. Teachers would have to decide if blogging would be an assignment done in and/or out of the classroom. It would be necessary to know if students were able to add to their blogs at home or not, based on Internet connectivity. Other than these considerations, additional resources would not be needed.

To ensure the right actions are taken to begin blogging in the middle school classroom, teachers should first be surveyed and their opinions solicited to what questions/concerns/training needs they may have about their students writing needs. The survey should also ask how technology could or does currently impact students' written work. If meaningful results are to come from using a technological tool, the change has to be "born of a spirit of collegiality, teamwork, and openness" (Nagel, 2011). By "Asking what has to be done, and taking the question seriously," it would ensure those teachers who really know the needs of their students are able to articulate and identify what aspects of writing need to be improved upon (Drucker, 2004). After that, necessary support from the e-Learning coach and technology staff would need to be offered to teachers so they felt comfortable moving forward with such an undertaking. Open communication between the building

administrators, teachers, and parents should also be a focus. This can be done through conversations at school, emails, and letters sent home to parents informing them of the blogging process. To successfully start up the blogging process, it would be beneficial to have an e-Learning coach co-teach with the classroom teacher and help students create and adjust the settings of their blog. Having an extra set of eyes, ears, and hands around middle schoolers is always a plus; it will also help avoid many of the hang-ups, slow-downs, and confusion that can take place when beginning to use a new technology. Once students do begin to post to their blog, having a shared document with the links to students' blogs would be useful for the teacher (and parents, administrators, other students) to easily find and read each student's writing. Lastly, built in support and mini-lessons for students and teachers about the advanced functions of blogs should be planned throughout the blogging process. Again, short meetings before or after school would provide time for teachers to share their concerns, questions, frustrations, and hopefully their successes. It would also be a great time to show new skills related to blogging, or to review skills teachers do not yet feel comfortable with. Less time spent in "meetings" would appeal to almost any time-strapped educator. Not to mention, "If teachers get professional development in which they are guided in how to have fun with technology, they'll bring that enthusiasm and sense of possibility to their students, and then everyone wins" (Nagel, 2011). The ideal final result of this implementation is that teachers would share out their students' writing in order to widen their audience and show that others are truly reading their blogs. Once students have been blogging for a few weeks, and then a few months, all parties involved (teachers, students, e-Learning coaches) should reflect on the process, evaluate how students' writing is improving, and make changes within the blogging implementation to help students find even more success.

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