"LOOK WHAT I DID!"

Student Conferences With Text-to-Speech Software

Chase Young ■ *Katie Stover*

I can empathize with struggling writers. I remember when my mom asked to read my homework. We both knew it would end in tears, but sadly it was a necessary ritual. She read and pointed out mistakes while I defended my perfectly constructed story.

School was no different. However, instead of crying, I cut-off each of the teacher's verbal corrections with a quick, "I know!" or "I meant to fix that!" I had a double deficit when it came to writing—not only did I struggle, but I was also terrified of critique. This double deficit is not uncommon because I see it everyday in my classroom. I see kids that timidly hide their writing and genuinely fear writing conferences. We dedicate this alternative 21st century revision method to those children.

The preceding scenario is not an isolated incident, but sadly it represents many students in classrooms all across the United States. The results of the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress writing exam reveal that 72% of fourth graders did not meet basic writing standards (Graham & Perin, 2007). The Writing Next Report offers a range of recommendations to address this lack of proficiency in writing. Specifically, it calls for a process approach to writing, with instruction of writing strategies for planning, revising, and editing along with opportunities for collaboration. In 2003, the National Commission on Writing suggested that writing was the neglected *R* and called for a writing revolution.

With the constant redefinition of what it means to be literate in a 21st century world with rapidly changing information communication technologies, we extend this call to include a need for a *digital* writing revolution. In response to emerging 21st century technologies, children need to be prepared to read, write, and communicate in new ways. Therefore, teachers are charged with finding ways to implement technology in the writing classroom.

Prensky (2001) described 21st century students as digital natives and referred to teachers as digital immigrants because most were not born into the digital world, although they may have adopted many aspects of technology. With young students being born into the digital age in which technology is a common part of their everyday lives, it is essential for teachers to expand beyond print literacies to incorporate digital literacies. In addition, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards across most of the United States requires teachers to integrate technology throughout the instructional day. According to the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Offices, 2010), students in kindergarten through fifth grade are expected to use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing.

The writing process has changed because of access to digital tools (Yancy, 2009). Dalton (2010) suggested that teachers can use technology in every

Chase Young is an assistant professor at Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, USA; email chase.young@tamucc.edu.

Katie Stover is an assistant professor at Furman University, Greenville, SC, USA; email katie.stover@furman.edu.

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aspect of writer's workshop. Recently, researchers and teachers have incorporated technology into the writing process in a variety of ways. Bogard & McMackin (2012) described the use of digital stories with third graders. Laru, Naykki, & Jarvela (2012) explored ways to collaborate using digital tools. Morgan and Smith (2008) shared how students use wikis to publish research reports for a wider audience. Stover and Young (in press) examined the use of VoiceThread for peer revision and editing. In addition, Olthouse (2012) suggested that students can use Web 2.0 tools during each aspect of the writing process, including planning, drafting, revising, and publishing.

Teachers emphasize that students need to develop self-editing and revision strategies (Ferris, 1995), but children may find it hard to identify errors in their "perfect" story (Kindzierski, 2009). To build agency in the young writers, it is important for students to attempt their own revisions and edits before conferring with the teacher. The difficulty lies in getting students to notice possible revisions and edits. This strategy offers a safe place for students to confer privately with speech-to-text software, allowing them to develop as agentive writers.

Student Conferences With an Avatar

Young and Swanner (2012) described a strategy that students use to privately revise and edit their own writing before conferring with the teacher. The strategy uses Voki.com, a free Web 2.0 tool. The text-to-speech program transforms the user's text into speech that is read aloud by a customizable avatar. The verbatim rendering by the avatar is a key function in this revision strategy. However, this strategy works with any text-to-speech software.

The goal of the strategy is to allow students to evaluate and revise their own writing as an avatar reads it aloud. During the revision phase, students confer privately with an avatar to build awareness of areas of needed revision and edits. Self-discovery of edits and revisions promotes agentive writers through self-evaluation and diagnosis of writing proficiency. The self-evaluative approach eliminates uncertainty, confusion, and negative views of student writing as they self-regulate the writing process (Strauss & Xiang, 2006). This interactive approach enhances students' motivation, engagement, and attitudes about writing.

Using Voki in the Classroom

There are a few simple steps that students need to follow to execute this strategy. First, students configure the avatar by logging on to Voki.com and choosing an avatar. Users can fully customize the look, and even the accent (e.g., Irish, Australian) of the avatars. Of course, this step is optional; if time is scarce, Voki.com provides default avatars.

Next, students type text into the avatar's textbox. Currently, the free version of Voki.com has a word limit, so students can break their writing into smaller chunks to use this strategy. Although students can type directly into the textbox, we suggest that students first use a word processer and copy and paste the text into the box.

Younger grades and limited computers are two factors that need to be considered during this step. Younger students will take longer to type in their text, and thus this strategy may be ideal for smaller pieces. In addition, managing this process can be tricky. One management suggestion is to allow students to use Voki.com as needed. As Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) reminded us, rather than "the" writing process, each student has "a" writing process. With students in different stages of writing, the avatar conference essentially becomes an additional step in the writing process.

After the text is inputted, the student clicks play. Ask students to listen without following along with their draft the first time. This allows the students to get a sense of what revisions and edits may be necessary during subsequent readings. After the initial reading, students locate the original draft and follow along as the avatar reads aloud. During this step, the goal is for students to identify and correct edits and contemplate possible revisions. As mentioned before, the avatar reads the text exactly as the text is

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written. When students consider edits, including misspellings or lack of punctuation, they can hear the mistakes out loud. For example, if a student leaves out the additional *p* in *hopping*, the avatar reads *hoping*. Students can also note lack of punctuation when an avatar does not pause where a student might intend. Consider the following two examples from a third-grade classroom.

Teacher: What changes are you going to make?

Student 1: I need more periods.

Teacher: How do you know that?

Student 1: …It wasn't very good, because it went in one fast glob.

Teacher: What changes did you make?

Student 2: I needed to fix some spelling errors. I needed to spell *grabbed* correctly.

Teacher: How did you know it was spelled wrong?

Student 2: It sounded wrong.

Teacher: Do you remember how the avatar said it?

Student 2: "grabed" [Student uses a long a sound.]

Teacher: We know that you have to do what to the consonant?

Student 2: Double it!

The avatar also helps students revise their writing. Students may not be able to pinpoint exact edits such as misspellings or incorrect punctuation, but they can sense something is wrong. Consider the following conversation the second author had with his student.

Teacher: So, how did your story sound when the avatar read it to you?

Student 3: It was pretty bad.

Teacher: I'm sorry, what?

Student 3: It was pretty bad. I've got a lot of changes to make. It just doesn't make sense.

The avatar enables students to hear their writing from a different perspective. The previous conversation exemplifies how some student writing is unorganized or incoherent. Telling a student that his or her story is difficult to understand is less effective than allowing the student to discover it for himself or herself.

In addition to the increased proficiency in editing and revising, students also see that writing is never perfect the first time, and revising can be a positive experience. Students need not fear the "mighty red pen," but embrace the recursive process of writing. Twenty-first century tools can create a safe place for students to develop, edit, and revise their writing (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

Conclusion

Teachers should no longer be digital immigrants. They have lived in the land of technology for long enough to be considered citizens. Therefore, teacher exploration of novel uses of technology in the classroom is ongoing. The self-editing strategy described is intuitive and effective, but should be considered a scaffold (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) for self-editing. The strategy helps students to see errors and possible revisions in their writing that can easily be overlooked, although teachers may wonder when to discontinue the use of the strategy.

Well, that depends. The strategy can be time-consuming, especially for younger students, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We have witnessed young writers begin to read their own writing more objectively, almost as if they were themselves avatars. Once this objectivity is achieved, the student can skip the Voki.com step; however, we always reserve the right to send a student to Voki if they need it. In addition, students can opt to use the strategy whenever necessary. Students typically do not protest about using Voki; after all, what is better than having an Australian Abraham Lincoln read a story about your favorite vacation?

TAKE ACTION!

1. Create an avatar.
2. Type text into the avatar's textbox.
3. Listen to the avatar read the text.
4. Follow along as the avatar reads.
5. Make changes based on the avatar's reading.

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