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Making a Cyber Literacy Connection From the Storage Room to the College Room

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What roles can colleges and universities play in serving the many young adults whom our public school systems fail? This article sheds light on how one university was able to make a literacy connection with students attending an Alternative High School (AHS). This connection enabled AHS students and teacher candidates to effectively carry out a writing project in cyberspace. Data indicated that as the AHS students worked closely with their mentors, they became more aware of literacy strategies they needed to construct meaning and were able to recognize and appreciate quality writing. Thus, creating more partnerships between higher institutions and AHS students can assist in maintaining and sustaining young adults in school until graduation and perhaps, beyond.

THE LATEST REPORT (2000) of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) indicated that five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000 without successfully completing a high school program. Data also revealed that in 2000, about three-fourths (75.8 percent) of the current-year dropouts were ages 15 through 18 and that about two-fifths (42.0 percent) of the dropouts were ages 15 through 17. The data indicate that the public high school system is not meeting the needs of many young adults. Thus, in addition to alternative placements, colleges and universities can take part in serving these young adults. This article sheds light on how one university was able to form a cyber literacy connection with students attending an Alternative High School (AHS). Its major purpose is to offer insights of a writing project so that professors, teacher candidates, classroom teachers and their students can replicate it.

In Mrs. Brown's (pseudonym) alternative high school classroom, she worked with students ranging in age from 13 to 18 (and even up to 21). The average student was two years behind grade level and reading was an extremely daunting task. Not only were the students facing a reading barrier, they were also contending with a barrier within their learning environment. Mrs. Brown stated that her class was once located in the busy hallway within the school building. She explained:

We placed old partitions in the long, dark hallway to keep others from walking through our class. However, there wasn't much that we could do to avoid being disturbed by the boisterous sounds surrounding our class. It was like we could hear everything in the school that made noise. For example, we heard, voices of students, shuffle of feet and last but not least, the bowler, what a rumbling sound it made.

Subsequently, her class was moved to a room that was formerly known as the school's storage room. The move to the storage room was an attempt to create a learning environment that was conducive to traditional learning (Kagen, 1987). In this room, Mrs. Brown taught four classes per day limited to twelve students each. A large number of the students had poor writing skills. Their papers lacked introductions and conclusions and had no paragraphs. Many students wrote papers that, unfortunately, had no relation to the question asked and were then,

encouraged to rewrite them. Therefore, her role was to enhance students' skills necessary for success at school and to further encourage them to bond with the staff and fellow students. She felt interacting and bonding with college students would be even more useful to student learning. Although she had a strong interest in this, she wasn't exactly sure how to make it happen. After hearing and reading about cyber literacy projects that engaged students in meaningful learning at a university some 45 miles away, she decided to have her name placed on the university's cyber-partnership list. Weeks later, she was contacted and invited to participate in the cyber literacy project (Boxie & Maring, 2001; Boxie, 2002). She gratefully accepted the partnership because she knew that technology was quite motivating and advantageous for her students and they enjoyed using computers. Accordingly, she used this opportunity to make a literacy connection from the storage room to the college room.

The Storage Room

The storage room, also known as the Alternative High School classroom, served students who had difficulty functioning in traditional high schools. These students lived on their own, with friends, or with a series of people. Some were self-supporting while others were homeless. The students attended the program two and one half hours per day, four days per week. The classes lasted six weeks (also known as a hexter), and they took two subjects at a time. Their academic subjects included reading, math, science, social studies, and English. They were also required to complete a health and wellness class (HIV/STD) which carried a half credit. Finally, the students took the class called "Secrets of Success" or "Seminar of Success" (SoS). In part, they covered topics such as having a positive attitude, developing communication skills, dealing with emotions, solving problems, and working as a team. The teacher stated, "some students move on after one six week session, many stay for a total of twelve weeks, while a few linger or don't return."

The first few minutes of each class period typically began by having a group discussion regarding their feelings. During that time the teacher used provocative questions that were taken from Les Christie's "Have You Ever" or "What If" books. Next, the students worked independently for the thirty minutes reading silently or developing and writing stories

they would send to their cyber-buddy for feedback. The feedback took the form of suggestion, guidance, praise, etc. Before being dismissed, the students would complete a self-assessment form for the day on the 5 P's (prompt, prepared, polite, participation and positive mental attitude) and tell Mrs. Brown something they learned that day.

Once a week Mrs. Brown held a Probation Intervention Class consisting of students trying to earn their way back into the program. These were returning students who had trouble completing their work or had an excessive number of absences.

The College Room

At a land grant institution in an isolated area of the northwest, teacher candidates in a content literacy course were assigned to complete a cyber literacy project. Teams were formed on the basis of common majors. For example, teacher candidates majoring in elementary education were paired with elementary teachers, and English majors were paired with English teachers. However, the English majors decided they wanted to make a difference in the lives of disadvantage youths, so they decided to pair with Mrs. Brown, an AHS teacher.

During the first four weeks of class, the main focus was helping teacher candidates build a knowledge base of literacy strategies needed to enhance writing. They spent many hours reading and reviewing professional texts and articles. The teacher candidates also reviewed Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALR) benchmarks and viewed archived course web sites that gave the teacher candidates insight into what was required as well as a sense of what others had accomplished in previous semesters. During the next few weeks of on-going communication and collaboration between the teacher candidates and the classroom teacher, ideas were exchanged, suggestions were given, and support was provided as the cyber literacy project unfolded. Researchers suggest that collaboration, shared purpose and commitment form the basis for a successful partnership (Mullen & Lick, 1999; Osguthorpe, Harris, Harris, & Black, 1995; Shive, 1984; Wangemann, Ingram, & Muse, 1989).

Writing Miss Daisy Project

The "Writing Miss Daisy" project was designed to support students' writing in an Alternative High School (Atwell, 1988; Graves, 1983). The title of this project was influenced by the name of the teacher candidate's favorite movie, *Driving Miss Daisy*. As teacher candidates planned this project, they considered the learning styles of the high school students and the desired skills needed for enhancing their learning. The goal for the activities and assignments were to encourage and challenge students to achieve in writing. As Romano (1987) explains:

Amid the madness of the demands for competence-based test of composing ability, minimum standards, ludicrous quantitative measures of writing skill, we English teachers too easily lose sight of our primary goal. We must encourage, beckon, urge, even incite every one of our students to write--- not occasionally and not in proper paragraphs or five-paragraph essays, but often, and in their individual voices, each cut loose, each growing, changing, and maturing by the very act of writing (p.14).

Students from the alternative high school were involved in writing a personal narrative based on an experience of their choice. They received their first e-mail from their cyber-buddy requesting that they begin by completing the first introductory writing activity on the "pit stop" called *Meet _____ in Cyber*. The "pit stop" was a timeline used to point out a day-by-day overview of what was expected to happen in class. One AHS student wrote:

Hi my name is Mary. I am 20 years old and going back to school for the third time. I like doing crafts and spending time with my little sisters. Most of my spare time is spent babysitting or playing games with my little sisters. How is college and is it what you thought it would be.

The response given by the college cyber-buddy stated:

Hi Mary, I am paired with you for this semester to respond to your writing. Part of the writing process is revising. I will ask

you questions about your writing and make suggestions to encourage you through this process. Don't forget to use your spell checker.

College is nothing like I thought. It is a time to meet new amazing people and learn things about myself I never knew. I wouldn't trade my time here at Northwestern State University for anything. I am very grateful for this opportunity. I am thankful for my family. I am excited to learn more about you and I hope some of this feedback helps. Mary, it is a pleasure to meet you!

Once cyber contact had been established, the AHS students took another trip to the "pit stop." The teacher candidates had constructed a student hand activity for helping the students generate information that would later be used to write a personal narrative. They outlined their hand on a sheet of paper and wrote words around the hand that described them or activities they enjoyed. For example, one hand had words written around it such as frog, California, Adidas, runner, May 22nd, etc. The students were asked to add details to their hand such as rings they were wearing, their wristwatch, or any scars/tattoos they had.

After minutes of writing words that described them, students worked with a partner and shared in details what they had written on their hand. For example, one student shared that the word "runner" meant that she was once a long distance runner. Once students had a chance to meet everyone and ask each other questions, they used the information from their hand activity to write a paragraph about them or a topic of interest. The strategy of clustering was also introduced. Some students used clustering to help them generate ideas of what to write about on their topic of interest. Clustering is a pre-write writing tool that helped students brainstorm ideas, explored the many directions that their topic took, narrowed down general ideas into more specific topic areas and discovered what they wanted to write about.

When the AHS students composed the first draft of their personal narrative, they were ready to follow the steps for engaging in the cyber writing activity with their cyber mentors. They used a preaddressed

email link to submit their work to their cyber mentors for feedback. The teacher candidates developed and used an analytical scoring guide to evaluate the students' overall performance. Analytic scales are grading guides that contain a list of qualities or features of writing, with a numerical rating for each item. The rated qualities were shared with students to provide them with the criteria to consider while writing.

One student wrote:

My interest is in old trucks, therefore, I am writing about old trucks. There are a lot of uses for old trucks, and cars. Today let us look at some of them. I found that you can soup them up and make them into high performance cars, and trucks. You can make them into low riders, jacked up. They have enough room for your big engines like your 440's, 454's, 427's, 350's, 302's, 360's. There is a lot of different types you can get, like Ford Chevrolet, Dodge, General motor company, Pontiac, Honda. There are a lot of different types of cars by these companies. You choose the company you want to deal with and ask about all the cars they put out and if they don't have the type of car you want then go to another company. Like if you went to Dodge and asked for a Camaro they would look at you as if you were joking, and if you went to ford and asked for a Chevrolet product they would look at you the same way. We all know that we need a reliable source of transportation and that is why I decided to do this.

The teacher candidate responded by saying:

GREAT start on your story! We are so impressed! We knew you could do it! The topic you chose is very interesting to us and you have included some fascinating information of how one could improve the quality of old trucks. But could you explain to us what you mean by "old trucks". How old is old? 1960? 1970? Or... Tell us other reasons why you like old trucks. Since, you mentioned both old cars and trucks in your story, perhaps you should state that in the introduction. Keep sending revisions and any other stories you have!

The teacher candidates felt that students were willing to write not only because they were writing about topics they were interested in but also because they knew we would diligently read it. The students wrote about topics such as cars, happiness, television, drugs, and sometimes violence. One teacher candidate stated that his cyber buddy was so motivated to write that her story was one of the first stories he received. He responded and asked her to add details to the events to help make it more believable. She had great chronology to her events but it lacked details. The AHS student responded the very next day with more details added to her story.

The Writing Miss Daisy project focused on reflecting on their story and deciding what elements to include. It also focused on editing and revising their narrative. This helped in developing writing, reading and critical thinking skills as they received feedback from the teacher candidates to evaluate the importance of information to be edited. Finally, the fact of publishing a story in cyber gave them a sense of accomplishment and a chance to see technology working for them and not excluding them because of their socio-economic background.

Using technology can sometime be a challenging endeavor, for example, during this project, servers went "down" or other glitches occasionally occurred (e.g., links did not work or graphics unexpectedly disappeared from the page). Other limitations involved lack of time in the content literacy course and sometime lack of effort on the part of the teacher candidate. In light of the limitations, it is clear that the classroom teacher, teacher candidates, and students need ongoing support to help them productively engage in cyber mentoring activities.

Feedback from the College Room

Teacher candidates were coached in advance so they could use various forms of electronic feedback. Twelve forms of electronic feedback (Bonk et al., 1998) were used as options/categories for giving feedback to AHS students as the interactions took place:

- social acknowledgment
- questioning

- direct instruction
- modeling/examples
- feedback/praise
- cognitive task structuring
- cognitive elaborations/explanations
- push to explore
- fostering reflection
- dialogue prompting
- scaffolding
- e-mail discussion (see Table 1).

Johnny, a teacher candidate, expressed his feelings, in general, about providing feedback to students during the writing process by saying: "I really enjoyed the authentic experience of being able to interact with a learning community through cyber. The students seemed very interested in the responses they received and really took what we said to heart. I could see the advancement of their writing skills as the project progressed."

As these categorized remarks reveal, the teacher candidates saw themselves as co-constructors of knowledge and were inspired to see that students took their advice to improve their assignments. Moreover, the teacher candidates' involvement as guides or mentors in this social collaborative environment helped enrich the students' writing.

Conclusion

Forming a cyber-partnership was an effective way of making a literacy connection from the storage room to the college room. As the AHS students worked closely with their cybermentors, they became more aware of literacy strategies (KWL, clustering, asking questions and writing process) they needed to construct meaning. The literacy strategies employed in the project helped students understand the specific actions they took in order to gain understandings and assess their learning. The literacy strategies also helped them to get their minds focused on the matter of reading and writing to learn and to engage in metacognition.

Students were also able to recognize and appreciate quality writing. As one student stated, "The strategies did improve my writing because the strategies helped me focus my writing and organize my ideas before writing. I usually have trouble concentrating on one specific topic, forming paragraphs as I write a paper, but this time, I felt so much better about it." Thus, an analytical rubric was used to assess students' written work. The students scored an overall average of 91 percent on measurements of the three writing traits (content/ideas, style, and organization).

During the process of cyber-partnership, literacy learning took place in cyber space where teacher candidates and AHS students were connected by electronic text. Throughout the ongoing communication, e-mail was used within the cyber-partnership for engaging in the writing activities. This made it possible for collaboration in a school-university project and thus, showed how cyber-partnering created an environment that encompassed both literacy and technology.

In addition, the Writing Miss Daisy project served many purposes beyond writing. Mrs. Brown stated that the classes working with college students had better attendance. They were enthusiastic about interacting through cyber space and receiving feedback from the teacher candidates. The students were taught to contextualize literacy strategies within the writing assignments as they worked to achieve success. Furthermore, several AHS students decided they wanted to become writers. One student who came to get a GED, decided to stay to get a diploma. He was so fond of his experience with college students that he wanted to move on to a technical institution after graduation and become a computer technician. Thus, creating more partnerships between colleges and AHS students can turn an obstacle and barrier into opportunities for successful literacy experiences.

Table 1

Cybermentoring Feedback

Feedback Categories	Examples
Social Acknowledgement	"Hi Bill, I liked your story. You have a lot of great ideas running throughout it."
Questioning	"Could you explain to us what you mean by "old trucks? How old is old? 1960? 1970? Or... Tell us other reasons why you like old trucks."
Direct Instruction	"Bill, remember back when you visited the "pit stop" and you used the clustering strategy to help you generate ideas for your topic? How might you use those ideas to add details to your story?"
Modeling/examples	"When gathering thoughts for a story, try asking yourself Who? What? When? Where? Why? And How? For example, When is a truck considered as an old truck?"
Feedback/Praise	"GREAT start on your story! We are so impressed! We knew you could do it!"
Cognitive Task Structuring	"As you begin to edit your paper, keep in mind the feedback you were given during the revision stage."
Cognitive Elaborations/Explanations	"What we can work on is separating out each event in the story and explain it just a little bit more. As a reader, I became confused when Cory was where and when."
Push to Explore	"Making cars into low riders sound interesting. You should try writing or contacting a car/truck company to find out how this is done."
Fostering Reflection	"New ideas should not be found in the conclusion. Rethink your main idea. Your conclusion might summarize your main points, pose a question, or propose a course of action."
Dialogue Prompting	"Lets work on separating out each scene. Just list it from your cereal story. Decide when and why your character goes to each scene. From this list we will work on adding detail to each scene."
Scaffolding/Suggestion	"Since, you mentioned both old cars and trucks in your story, perhaps you should state that in the introduction. Keep sending revisions and any other stories you have!"
Management (via private e-mail or discussion)	"Hello colleagues, I have immediately e-mailed my response to my cyber buddy. Remember, we should all be doing this with all our responses. Have a great weekend!"

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