



Taking Teachers Through the Portal

Creating tools to help teachers use Digital Writing within the curriculum

A report of the Writers for the Future in the Classroom project
 carried out for NESTA by the trAce Online Writing Centre
 April 2003-March 2005

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1 Executive Summary

"Kids on the Net is unique in providing hands-on ICT literacy resources that are designed in the classroom and integrated into each classroom with high levels of teacher support. By listening to teachers and students, providing simple but effective tools for digital writing, giving students a moderated publishing space and troubleshooting with teachers, they achieve excellent results in motivating young people to write and improve their writing - not to mention the side benefits of effective use of ICT and developing ICT skills."

Joe Elliott, NESTA Advisor to Writers for the Future

There is a problem in naming the kind of work reported here, in expressing satisfactorily the moving on from writing that can be experienced either in print or in digital form to writing that is uniquely digital - i.e. that can only be read if mediated by a computer. I am calling this Digital Writing and it includes technologies like Flash animation, hypertext and interactive stories, but not, for example, poems or articles that could as easily be read in print, or PDF files - which are just digital delivery of print materials.

I believe that using Digital Writing in schools has some of the following advantages:

- Raising achievement:
- Motivating pupils by using technology:
- Developing a modern literacy for a digital future:
- Preparing pupils for the working world:
- Providing new ways for young people to express themselves creatively.

Kids on the Net (www.kidsonthenet.com or kotn.ntu.ac.uk) was one of the earliest websites publishing children's writing on the Web. Over the past eight years it has provided the opportunity for children to publish "traditional" writing such as stories and poems online and respond to and receive feedback from other young people all over the world. Kids on the Net has developed specifically online writing projects for young people to take part in, and has aimed to develop Digital Writing with young people.

The **first Teachers' Portal** was built in July/August 2002 with funding from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) as a pilot project. It aimed to provide teachers with real support to use Kids on the Net, and particularly its Digital Writing resources, in their classrooms, while still delivering the current curriculum. The Portal contained a series of resources, based on existing Kids on the Net material, that were directed at stated objectives of the National Literacy Framework for Key Stage 2. It provided information for teachers about digital forms of writing, including hypertext and collaborative online writing, and tools to develop such writing in the classroom and link it to the curriculum.



Writers for the Future in the Classroom was part of the trAce Online Writing Centre's Writers for the Future project (www.writersforthefuture.com), again funded by NESTA, which aimed to promote new media writing or Digital Writing and to provide training and resources for those writers, artists and classes creating the digital works. This action research project also aimed to set out criteria for best practice in creating digital or new media writing.

One outcome of Writers for the Future was the book "Writers for the Future: a Print View" which can be downloaded at www.writersforthefuture.com/news/booklet.htm

Our Digital Teacher in Residence, Simon Widdowson, updated the resources, relaunched the eTeachers' Portal and created two major new projects (Dragonsville and Adventure Island) aimed at both (a) delivering National Framework or other curriculum objectives and (b) developing the use of Digital Writing in the Classroom. The projects were built in accordance with our "access ramp" model to gradually introduce teachers to the elements of Digital Writing through work with direct relevance to the curriculum, taking them from their current skill level to the level required to undertake Digital Writing projects with confidence.

Some of the advantages teachers reported of using the eTeachers' Portal resources include:

- Real publication with a global readership on Kids on the Net;
- The safety aspects of both the eTeachers' Portal resources and the publishing policies of Kids on the Net;
- Interactivity;
- Support for developing teachers' skills;
- The focus on writing as a key skill for visual and multimedia literacy.

The criteria for developing best practice in the creation of Digital Writing in schools and with young people are as follows:

- To guide teachers along the "access ramp";
- To provide sustainable innovative projects for many teachers (and classes) to experience;
- To encourage the development of universal skills for literacy and Digital Writing not software-dependent methodologies;
- To encourage wider publication on the Internet of digital projects produced in schools.
- To keep digital resources relevant to the existing curriculum;
- To provide tools for young people themselves to write for digital media.

When using our Digital Writing projects in class the following should be considered:

- Teachers should ensure they are very familiar with the project and confident in using the digital tools before they begin: **planning is particularly important.**
- Enough **time should be set aside** to do the project justice.
- Teachers may need to **let the children lead** the direction - the pupils may be more *au fait* with online narrative and how digital story works, and how to move it along.
- Classes should **share** their work with the rest of the school, and the wider community.
- **Good technology** and **good technical support** is key
- Enthusiastic teachers need to be **prepared to experiment**;
- There needs to be **enough flexibility** in the curriculum to be creative;
- **Awareness** that ICT is a tool to be used within subjects not a curriculum area separate from the others: and specifically that Digital Writing is concerned with literacy not ICT skills;
- Solid **leadership** with an understanding of how literacy goals can be met with Digital Writing.