



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
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1 Executive Summary

2 What is Digital Writing?

3 Introduction

4 Writers for the Future in the Classroom



5 Lessons and Guidelines

5.1 Tips for teachers using this kind of project in their classrooms

Digital Writing can clearly meet literacy goals when used effectively. Like all new techniques of teaching and all use of technology, there is a learning curve involved in using these methods in the classroom. However, as Dragonsville pilot teacher Richard Clark said, "It's worth it - the children get so much more out of it."

Here are some tips recommended by teachers who have taken part in our pilot projects:

- Make sure you are very familiar with the project and confident in using it before you begin (EDR). I had to personally know the project well, and the site well, in order to teach effectively. (LP) Go through the process yourself before doing it with the class (CSD) I would emphasise the importance of **planning**, particularly a linear plan of the order in which things need to be done. (JJ)
- It's the kind of project which may need to be done in one go over 2 days rather than over a fragmented period of time. (EDR)
Set aside time to do the project justice. (LP)
- Be willing to **let the children lead** the direction - they may be more au fait with online narrative and how digital story works, how to move it along. (CSD)
- Plan an associated paper-based activity in case of technical failures or other hold-ups, so the children have something to do. (CSD)
- **Share your work** with the rest of the school, e.g., in assembly with a projector. (CSD)
- **Disseminate information** about the project in the school newsletter so that parents can look on the Internet and see what their children have been doing. (CSD)

The Writers for the Future team would also add that to do this kind of writing successfully in schools you need:

- Good **technology** and good **technical support** (much more widespread now than at the beginning of the project);
- Enthusiastic teachers **prepared to experiment**;
- Enough **flexibility** in the curriculum to be creative;
- An **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.

While all of the teachers in the pilot projects improved their skills and confidence in using digital writing in the classroom, and stated that they hoped to continue using Kids on the Net projects and other digital writing activities in their classrooms, two of the teachers with whom we worked in the pilot stages of Adventure Island have become interested enough to want to do more of these kind of projects and to involve other teachers in their schools and LEAs. This kind of cascading of skills and awareness is exactly what Writers for the Future hoped to achieve.





5.2 *Lessons learned / guidelines for Kids on the Net*

5.2.1 How we support Digital Writing in schools: criteria for best practice

- **Guide teachers along the “access ramp”.**
Digital Writing in schools is still in its infancy (see the Apprenticeship Cycle model of learning described above) but as the technology becomes more available and more reliable in schools, teachers are becoming more confident with it and looking for new ways to use it. We have provided the resources within the eTeachers’ Portal to allow them to experiment at whatever level they feel comfortable with along the “access ramp”. The resources will continue to be of use to schools (with minimal maintenance from staff) to display children’s work, which is within the remit of the existing Kids on the Net resourcing.
- **Sustain innovative projects for many teachers (and classes) to experience.**
From the responses we have seen during this project, our work is still seen as innovative. There is still work to do to help teachers, education advisers and others working with kids to write with technology to see the full potential (beyond using the digital as a tool, e.g., a writer working with kids by email but the writing still happens offline; or extending a round robin story to become non-linear). If Digital Writing is seen in the context of a wider movement to increase the use of technology in education and the arts, then it seems likely that more and more of what can be called Digital Writing or new media writing will take place. The resources and projects created by Writers for the Future and the ongoing Kids on the Net team are in a good position to continue to take a lead role in that. It’s important that projects continue to run for as long as possible so that they can be experienced by as many teachers as possible as they come to explore this field.
- **Encourage the development of universal skills for eliteracy and Digital Writing not software-dependent methods.**
Restrictions on the kinds of software and hardware available in schools mean that Digital Writing that happens is not necessarily happening in a sustainable way (e.g., writing animated stories in Powerpoint). There is scope here to provide in future educational resources and training showing how to move beyond Powerpoint. The elements of writing digital stories need to be taught in the context of learning the writing craft generally, not just in ICT lessons.
- **Encourage wider publication on the Internet of digital projects produced in schools.**
It’s been my experience over and over again that digital projects often don’t see the light of day because they are not published. I’ve only found out about them myself through talking to practitioners and attending conferences where a project may be demonstrated publicly for the one and only time outside the school or LEA intranet. Yet publication on the Web is a strong motivator for children (see their comments in Appendix 4). Some of the reasons for this lack of publication include the difficulty of teachers publishing on the Web without spending a lot of time and becoming experts in HTML; also there are concerns about safety which discourage teachers who don’t have time to become experts on the safe ways to publish. Intranets within groups of schools and within LEAs and within school-only communities have become so popular for the perceived values of safety that public websites are barely considered, even if it for perfectly safe publication purposes. The eTeachers’ Portal could be used to demonstrate the advantages of online publication. Possible future developments in this area are discussed in Section 6.



- **Keep digital resources relevant to the existing curriculum.**

Teachers and education advisers don't have time to look "out of the box" and are very reliant on the information sent by educational organizations (this has implications for our marketing). Literacy and ICT advisers generally aren't readers of electronic literature or consumers of digital creativity in the way that children are. Reading the digital is still a minority interest among adults. Due to lack of time, resources that fit into the curriculum and are endorsed by, e.g., BECTA or QCA are preferred - teaching is becoming more homogeneous with less room for innovation. It is vital that resources are high quality and have a clear place in the curriculum. Our resources aimed to meet these requirements.

 - We used experienced teachers, now education consultants, to set up initial teacher portal;
 - A teacher-in-residence was specifically employed to write further content;
 - All projects were developed to meet specific objectives in the National Literacy Framework as well as wider curriculum aims where possible;
 - Projects were evaluated and prototyped by practicing teachers in schools.
- **Provide tools for young people themselves to write for digital media.**

There are some very high-quality digital resources produced by multimedia education providers (and to some extent they compete for attention with our lower-tech website), but on the whole they are not encouraging children to make their own digital works. Such resources include subscription websites, CDs, DVDs and software that provide interactive and animated literacy and other activities. As a free resource our technical resources are limited and we choose to keep our design deliberately low-tech (simple, but appropriate) to foreground the writing aspect, to be seen as teacher-friendly and to encourage teachers to think they can achieve something similar at this level. The participatory aspect of our projects is very important to maintain, and is a unique feature compared with subscription websites and CDs that do not include this publication aspect.

5.2.2 Giving young people a real stake in the digital aspects of writing

Like much of the work previously mentioned, many of the Digital Writing projects on Kids on the Net required the input of a digital writer to make the website work, but on projects such as Adventure Island the ideas and the final form of the new media can be chosen by the young people themselves. For example, some liked to create branching adventure stories, others a game-like narrative.

It is probable that the writers of the future who will be creating Digital Writing will develop not by watching and working with current "new media writing" or "Digital Writing practitioners" but by combining skills learned from a variety of sources - ICT technical experts, artists, writers, all of whom show some new media influences in or aspects of their work, and also, significantly, their own experiments with digital communication including SMS, blogging, free web tools, and their peers. For those of us who are predominantly digital writers, it is even more important to continue to work in schools to help individual teachers and students through this apprenticeship cycle.

In my view it would be interesting to do a research project into the "underground" creative writing activities of young people in games communities, forums and interactive environments like *the Sims* and *Habbo Hotel*, and to find out what tools they would like to have to improve their Digital Writing.





6 Future Directions

6.1 Future of eTeachers' Portal

A repeated comment is that examples of good practice in this area are very difficult to find. We have just started to see teachers turning to the eTeachers' Portal as a place to publicise their work. The eTeachers' Portal is an obvious place to disseminate good practice in the UK and from around the world.

Possible next steps could include:

- Developing the mailing list into a **network of teachers** interested in this kind of work. As more teachers become involved in it, such a network could be crucial to helping them develop their skills and understanding.
- Seeking out examples of good practice and **documenting** them. Collect information about what is happening and publicise it - e.g., case studies, how-we-did-it. Get others to submit these where at all possible (have had a couple of enquiries along these lines so far).
- Becoming a **hub for the sharing** of good practice. Encouraging schools and LEAs to share their work outside walled gardens. Publishing or linking to the outcomes of Digital Writing projects.
- Joining **organisations** and contacting key researchers to make them aware of the final results of the Writers for the Future project and to set the stage for possible future partnerships.
- We have set up an **eTeachers' News Blog** facility so that as new projects and initiatives come to our notice we can share them on an ongoing basis in a manner easily maintained within existing funding. (This can be seen under "News" on the eTeachers' Portal site.)
- We could bring our resources to the notice of the **teacher training** bodies where there are likely to be more opportunities in future to explore Digital Writing.

So long as we can secure further funding (see Section 6.2) then we will continue to bring this work to the attention of teachers, to encourage sharing of good practice and to build a network of the diverse people involved in Digital Writing, many of whom don't realize that they are part of a movement.



6.2 Future of Kids on the Net & similar organisations

Kids on the Net will continue to develop projects for clients in the education, local authority and arts sectors and to apply for grants to develop projects for UK schools and with a global reach. The work with Writers for the Future provides a sound basis for this activity in future. Our funding may come from sponsorship and consultancy based on the work we have done during Writers for the Future. A marketing campaign involving a dedicated section on the eTeachers' Portal website, and publicity in the Artscape Directory is already underway, and is beginning to attract enquiries. We are also working to be added to Curriculum Online.

Our work in schools must continue to be of good quality and replicable by teachers. It is always preferable to develop teachers' skills rather than to work solely with a class or group of children.

We will be applying for new sources of funding for new projects, always producing teachers' resources and tools wherever possible so that projects can be made available to other teachers after the pilot phases. Projects and accompanying resources should continue to sit on the



“access ramp” to provide teachers with a clear path towards more advanced Digital Writing. That does not mean that projects cannot be innovative and extra-curricular as well.

The time taken to edit submissions has already become a problem with Dragonsville and other areas of Kids on the Net. We cannot create new projects if staff are bogged down editing the old ones. A variety of measures are being taken to address this issue. Future projects should, like Adventure Island, involve teachers more closely in monitoring their pupils’ writing. To encourage classes to submit only their best work we have added passwords to some of the submission forms (e.g., for Kids’ Castle and the Naming Pool in Dragonsville): teachers may apply for the passwords freely but it will discourage the instant submission by young people of writing without thought, random keyboard symbols and abusive messages.

Kids on the Net needs to broaden participation with involvement by more teachers, writers and others. The mailing list developed during this project is a good place to start to find such collaborators. We have also recruited volunteers from among Nottingham Trent University teacher trainees and offered volunteer opportunities to staff working for our sponsor Experian.

We will build on the experience of the Teacher Tools Advisory Group by making more use of the Kids on the Net Advisory Board and extending their remit to the eTeachers’ Portal.

It’s likely that Kids on the Net will in future have more contact with both the School of Education and a Learning and Teaching Support group within Nottingham Trent University, with varied expertise in web development and graphic design and other people doing web-based education projects.

Experience with the Writers for the Future project has demonstrated that the input of a teacher was invaluable to give the “view from the chalk face” or, more realistically nowadays, “from the interactive whiteboard”! Opportunities will be sought to secure further teachers in residence or ways of working in partnership with teachers and others in education.



6.3 Development potential

Elearning is becoming more mainstream in schools. By using the “access ramp” model we have ensured that when our simpler online literacy tasks become more commonplace there is a clear path towards more innovative and inspiring ways to use Digital Writing in education.

Many of the projects produced during Writers for the Future and by Kids on the Net are particularly appropriate for use with interactive whiteboards which are increasingly available in schools.

Other trends can be spotted for development work:

- the use of blogs;
- more after-school clubs with access to the school ICT lab and a need to do something creative;
- greater use of technology in schools for the community as teachers and schools become more familiar with it
- initiatives to develop creativity in the classroom.

Conclusion

“In today’s networked society, children read and communicate across a range of platforms. They consume and engage with new media at every turn - on their mobile



phones, in the games they play at home, in the entertainments available in their communities, on the family computer and TV. The classroom teacher who is disengaged from the digital world is not only unable to meet the challenges of teaching within this entirely new conceptual framework, but is oblivious to the opportunities it offers.

“Simon Widdowson, the Digital Teacher-in-Residence, worked closely with teachers and schools to create web-based resources focused on curriculum needs yet innovative in concept. The resources, including Dragonsville and Adventure Island, were fine tuned with feedback from the pilot teachers and continue to be available.

“This is a learning-by-doing medium and the eTeachers' Portal, with its web-writing activities, personalised workshops and consultancy service, is an invaluable resource for the enterprising teacher wishing to acquire new skills. I look forward to seeing its further promotion in the classroom supported by a suite of training visits and extended training materials for teachers.”

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