

Computer as writing tool

Tolly tries PowerPoint for stages of writing

*Rebecca Tolly,
Axtell Park Middle School, Sioux Falls*

As a former language arts teacher, I want to weave writing into my personal computing lessons. I came to the DWP hoping to find ways to advocate writing while working to meet the goals of my computer curriculum. My hope is to harness the eager attitude students usually hold toward anything computer-related and guide it toward using the computer as an effective writing tool.

During the DWP, I identified my biggest challenge as the student tendency to compose on the computer and deem this first attempt a final draft. Since mine is not a formal English class, kids do not assume the same accountability for the quality of their writing as they would for language arts. I addressed this by making revision a natural part of the instructional process.

I focused on one of my PowerPoint assignments in which students tell about themselves through a series of slides. On one slide they relate a scene from their childhood. Typically, the story is tapped out with little thought or planning. Once the slide is full, the story ends. I decided to break this one writing opportunity down to a progression of steps. DWP participants served as my guinea pigs as I tested this new approach.

In the form of a bulleted list, we started by brainstorming memorable moments from childhood. Right away, scenarios came to mind of an escaped pet turtle or making a little sister eat soap. When the list was finished, we then worked on other slides depicting various aspects of our lives and personalities. Later we returned to the childhood slide to select one particular event from the list. After telling the story to a neighbor, we listed the important details on our slide. When this was accomplished, we sent our writing to the printer. On the hard copy, we created a topic sentence that would capture the attention of the reader. To give organization to our writing, we numbered the listed details to establish the order in which they would appear. Finally it was time to bring the story back to the slide in paragraph form.

The experiment was a success. This approach allows students to walk through the writing process without identifying it as a "writing assignment". Furthermore, students can take time away from a particular writing task to work on other slides, which is an important ingredient in revision. I have high hopes for implementing this approach in my classroom this fall. ☺

Grounding your writing classroom

Tranberg considers adapting Morrell's exercise for her own students

Mary Tranberg, Lincoln High School, Sioux Falls

Joe Jones at Lincoln High School in Sioux Falls, SD, on August 29, 2001, enters Room A401, Mrs. Tranberg's English classroom, and sees on the board: "Why write? How do I write? What have I learned about writing? What are the qualities of good writing?" He is overwhelmed and skeptical. What is this all about? I don't even like to write! What in the world are we going to have to do in here?!

Although I am writing this article in Vermillion on the USD campus in the Dakota Writing Project's Mac lab on Thursday, June 21, 2001, I anticipate the above questions being answered by my students in writing on hot-dog folded paper. Sue Morrell, DWP Institute Co-Director, demonstrated the "Grounding Your Writing Classroom" activity on the second day of the writing project. In taking us through this demonstration, Morrell provided us with a way "to bring theory and practice together, from Day One, in your classroom" (from <http://www.usd.edu/engl/DWP/activities/grounding.html> on the Dakota Writing Project's website).

I will use this activity in all of my high school language arts classes this coming school year. As Morrell led us through the grounding process as DWP students, I found it an opportunity to think about my own views of writing. Hearing the ideas of other participants in my group and other groups was valuable. The posters we created are still on the wall in Room 103.

Second year DWP teacher Stef Rysdahl used the activity with her fifth graders at JFK Elementary School in Sioux Falls at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year. "It seemed to make sense," said Rysdahl. She especially liked the poster on "What are the qualities of good writing?" As she uses the grounding activity for a second year, she sees herself adding to this poster as the school year progresses.

Morrell explained, "I use this grounding activity during the first few days of class to set the tone for all writing that will come." The thinking/writing/sharing that this activity involves is invaluable. Morrell often breaks the activity into two separate class periods. The individual writing and small group sharing constitute the first class period. Small groups create and share posters for each of the questions during the next class period.

At the end of my class on August 30 (end of the two-day activity), Joe Jones knows his own answers to the four questions, has worked with a group of his peers on one specific question, and has shared the small group's poster with the entire class. He may not be totally sold with my emphasis on writing, but he will definitely be grounded for the year. I hope this grounding will provide a "spark" or interest in writing that will connect Joe to himself, others, and the world. ☺

Stories from the classroom

As a teacher of writing, Rysdahl jumps into the deep end of the pool

Stefanie Rysdahl, JFK Elementary, Sioux Falls

I remember my summers in Clarkfield, Minnesota, spending many, many hours at the swimming pool. My childhood friend Sara would take a huge running jump and become fully engulfed in the frigid water. The diving boards beckoned Sara over to attempt the latest trick, whether it be a dive, back flip or belly flop. I would quietly sit by the pool's edge and dip my toes into the water. In descending order, I would adjust to the temperature before slowly sliding into the pool. The diving board's persuasive voice could not lure me to its risky practices.

After a summer at the Dakota Writing Project, I plunged into the water, asking how can we as teachers improve our writing instruction? We tell our stories and allow our students to tell theirs. Only when we share our stories can we begin to understand each other and develop that universal story.

These ideas were much more of a conviction in June than at the end of August when I had just had sketches scratched out in my head of how this was all going to work. I was going to let go and allow kids to tell their own stories. Nightmares that haunted me at the beginning of every school year took on an extra twist, as now the kids were not only out of control, but they were belly flopping into the water. And yet I was going to trust in this letting go. Stories and passions, not prompts and artificial writing activities, were going to guide my student-driven classroom.

I couldn't help but test the waters by beginning with my stories. Stories from childhood like the tomato fight or a mistaken noon detention when all I was doing was telling a classmate to be quiet. My stories continued with the present – my family, friends, and my cute pooch, Tucker, and our adventures together. There was no turning back. The teacher was going to have to get in the water herself—to be ready for the divers and splashes, and more importantly, to be ready to pull in the toe dippers.

Students entered a classroom where the community was built around reading, writing, and conversation. Students brainstormed their personal stories. Soon, the stories in the classroom began to multiply. There were coming-of-age stories like Ben's first water skiing experience, which ended up with swim shorts down to his ankles, or Alecia writing a letter to the father whom she had never met.

There were passionate stories of beloved pets that would hide under the couch until coaxed out with favorite toys, or horse back riding lessons that also involved the down and dirty of stall cleaning. Other stories included sibling love and rivalry, embarrassing moments, or accidents that involved broken bones, or just resounding laughter. Some were about favorite sporting activities, and many others just involved time spent with family and friends.

These storytellers followed me during recess duty. They told a few friends and me personal stories that were still too private to put on classroom paper. Stories of bullies in and outside of the school day, and friendships gone awry, or of parents fighting and splitting up.

These stories continue to grow as I returned to the 2001 DWP with the desire to continue on my quest of creating a classroom of writers and learners/scholars. Once again, I am listening to the wonderful stories that have created a strong community of learners. I am telling the story of myself that will once again empower me to strive towards a pool full of learners where belly flops are accepted along with back flips, swan dives, front floats, and backstrokes. A pool where once again I will be in the water guiding, coaching, and maybe even stepping onto that diving board. ✎

E- Anthology and newsletter offer avenues for conversation, publication

Nancy Zuercher, USD, Vermillion

DWP teachers in the 2001 Summer Institute flexed their communication muscles in the NWP E-Anthology and in the newsletter you are reading right now, thanks to Michelle Rogge Gannon's leadership.

The E-Anthology is an on-line center for writing and professional conversation among participants in NWP summer institutes throughout the United States. When DWP technology facilitator Michelle Rogge Gannon introduced it to us, she modeled how to use the site and then helped us register, log in, introduce ourselves, and respond to a professional conversation in the Salon. By the end of the third week, three of us had the courage to post writing in the Open Mic section and anticipate the joy of responses by people in other projects and our own. Sometimes the responses pointed the writer to new ways of seeing, as Shari Williams of the Little Rock Writing Project wrote to Crystal Benning: "This sounds like the groundwork for a great Position Paper to me."

What better way for an editor to introduce a newsletter than with a newsletter on the making of a newsletter? Michelle's four-page newsletter was a veritable crash course in newsletter journalism. Armed with it and Michelle's instruction, we quickly learned the importance of a newsletter's purpose and objectives, the inverted pyramid for articles, the difference between hard and soft leads, the joys of fresh language. Eager to write, we signed up for articles to cover the 2001 Institute, drafted them, and discussed them in our response groups. Some of these pieces appear in the issue you're now reading—the largest-ever in the history of *The Write Connections*. ✎



Daschle shook hands with all of the teachers present. Here, he connects with Nicole Groen.

about all of the writing they had done in the DWP Institute and how learning to see themselves as writers was helping them to become better teachers of writing.

Daschle asked, “How important is it that you receive federal funding to be here?” DWP director Nancy Zuercher responded quickly to the possibility of block granting of federal funds under proposed legislation. “We would be in Pierre lobbying to get legislators’ attention rather than working with teachers which we’re doing here.” Other DWP teachers made it clear that, as much as they loved DWP, they couldn’t afford to be at the Summer Institute without the stipend that DWP provides. Mary Schmitz said, “It’s why I’m here; I wouldn’t have come otherwise.”

Senator Daschle’s question regarding mandatory testing and assessment evoked some passionate responses. Overwhelmingly, DWP teachers felt that passing legislation requiring assessment would be detrimental to their students and to education as a whole. Stefanie Rysdahl stated that when mandatory assessments turn education into teaching to the test, she would leave the profession, despite her great love and passion for teaching.

Mary Schmitz echoed Stefanie’s sentiments. Mary pointed out that many students, sick of so much testing, don’t take it seriously and, despite words of caution from her, fill in parts of the tests randomly, making “chains”

and patterns as they fill out the tests, to amuse themselves. She added, “When it comes down to my reputation, salary, and job depending on students’ scores, there is something very wrong with the system.”

DWP Summer Institute co-director Sue Morrell said about standardized testing, “It’s not improving their performance. We’re spending so much time preparing them for the tests that we’re losing valuable authentic instruction time. We are giving them tests before we know what’s in their hearts.” Yankton teacher Michele Fler went on to explain, “The tests don’t match our best teaching practices. For instance, we teach writing as a process which includes many drafts with revising and editing, whereas the national writing test asks the students to write their only draft in twenty minutes with awful prompts.”

“I’ll go back to school this fall a better teacher for having been in the Dakota Writing Project.”
—Paula Wilson

Daschle, without being confrontational, went on to ask how, then, are schools held accountable without testing? Crystal Benning, a Madison teacher, talked about accreditation groups that help individual school districts identify their own needs and write their own curriculum. “There is assessment built into these plans with more appropriate ways to measure student success,” Benning said.

Senator Daschle remarked with surprise that no one had brought up teacher pay; South Dakota teachers are some of the lowest paid in the nation. Sue Morrell, South Dakota’s English Teacher of the Year for 2000, mentioned that her new teaching job next year was going to mean taking a pay cut, but that she had made a conscious decision to make the move. She stated that she and her husband both teach and had reared four children on teacher salaries. She said, “It wasn’t always easy, but you don’t go into teaching for the money.”

Pre-service teacher Sherry Korthals said, “What it really boils down to is you need to pay teachers more. It’s impossible for me to stay here with my student loans and teach on a first-year teacher’s salary. I need to go out of state.” Sara Hefling, who teaches at SDSU, said, “I grew

up in a family with both parents as teachers. I understand what living on a teacher's salary means." She went on to say that, despite the poor salaries for teachers in South Dakota, she was going to pursue a career in education and not in the counseling field—a field in which she would have earned more money. She said, "There are a lot of kids out there in need, and school is sometimes the only place they can get that needed help."

As a way of providing closure, Senator Daschle asked the members to share some of the positive and negative things about the state of education in South Dakota. Mary Schmitz remarked that the positive was the students. She stated, smiling, that some of the best people she knew and some of the ickiest people she knew were her students—and she loved them all. Paula Wilson echoed Mary's sentiments. She said, "Because I teach on the borders of Iowa and Nebraska, I've had a number of opportunities to leave South Dakota and get better pay. However, I stay in South Dakota because of the students."

Senator Daschle thanked Nancy Zuercher for inviting him and the DWP teachers for their input. The meeting ended with Daschle reminding them of the valuable effect they have on young people. "By far, besides my parents, the most influential people in my life have been my teachers," he said.

Afterwards, Mary Schmitz told a reporter from *The Sioux City Journal*, "I was very flattered he came and that he wanted to deal with the issues instead of making it a photo op. I don't think his own opinion formed the agenda. I think he was really interested."

While Daschle's visit may not lead to increased teacher salaries in South Dakota or to the failure of federal legislation mandating assessment testing, the teachers of the 2001 Dakota Writing Project knew that their opinions and concerns had been heard.

Federal funding for the National Writing Project, and consequently the Dakota Writing Project, continues to remain a concern. Daschle told a reporter from Vermillion's newspaper, *The Plain Talk*, "What I was trying to get today was some of the rhetorical arguments that I need to go back and fight some more," adding, "We've got to be very concerned about losing the program sometime before the end of the year." Daschle has been a co-sponsor of National Writing Project legislation ever since he became a senator.

Daschle's visit happened in part because of the persistence of DWP director Nancy Zuercher. She had met with Daschle's education aide in Washington, D.C. in early April 2001 and also in 1999 and 2000, extending invitations to visit the DWP. ↘



Daschle poses with Stefanie Rysdahl. A picture similar to this one made the front page of *THE SIOUX CITY JOURNAL* July 3.



Becky Tolly, Nicole Groen, and Heather Lund view articles about the DWP published in area newspapers the day after Senator Daschle's visit.

The Lesson of the Lever

Michele Fleer, Stewart Elementary, Yankton

It should have been the perfect science lesson. I had all the materials set up and ready to go. I had practiced the activity several times. I completely understood the intricate details of how the lever, simplest of all simple machines, works. I was prepared to lead my second graders into an exemplary learning experience.

I started the lesson as I had carefully planned. We read some introductory material from our science book together. I shared with them a trade book about levers; what they are, what they do, and how they work. Smooth sailing so far. What should have been the highlight of the lesson – putting together and using the lever—came next. This is when things started to go downhill.

Simply getting past the materials was the first major hurdle. They included a large rock, the handle from an old garden rake, and a paper bag with handles. Nothing out of the ordinary, one would think. One would be wrong.

First the rock. I passed it around so everyone could feel for himself or herself how heavy it was. As the rock moved from student to student, one of the boys said, “Cool rock, Mrs. Fleer. Where did you get it?”

“At Crazy Horse Monument in the Black Hills,” I replied. “Are you noticing how heavy it is?”

“I been there!” said another student. “Did you climb up by the guy’s head?”

“No, I didn’t. Who has a prediction about whether the rock will be harder to lift or easier to lift with our lever?” I asked, deliberately pulling the discussion back on track.

“Well, how’d you get the rock then?” asked Student Number Two.

“They had a pile of rocks from the blasting site. If you donated some money, you could take one of the rocks,” I said patiently.

“Blasting! Sweet! Like with dynamite?” asked Student Number One.

“How much did it cost you?” asked another.

“Yes, with dynamite. And it didn’t cost anything. You could just give whatever amount of money you wanted. I think we put in one dollar. I’d really like to hear someone’s prediction now, please.” Still patient, but getting a little edgy.

“But what about if you just put in a penny? Would they let you take a rock then? Or would they make you put it back?” asked the money-man.

“Jana has her hand up,” I said. “Do you think the rock will be easier or harder to lift with our lever?”

“I don’t know, but once at the grocery store I saw this metal box where you could put money and then take a piece of candy. They didn’t even tell you how much money. I think that is so dumb because you could put in a quarter and take one piece of candy and some other person could just put in a penny and take lots of

Breath

Sue Morrell, Wagner High School, Wagner

Listening to the radio, I learn
that scientists blow on butterfly wings
to force the wings to still.

I am transported, then,
to the empty lot where we play baseball,
where yellow and black and orange scraps of cloth
bob and drift in the tall grass beyond the outfield.

Game over,
we capture butterflies
when they fall asleep on the heads of weeds.
We pinch their folded wings in grubby fingers.
We giggle as they dance, touch their frantic legs to our noses,
tickled by their struggle to escape,
to fly away.

When we let go,
wing powder clings to our thumbs,
our forefingers.
It is powder finer than confectioner’s sugar,
finer than the dust at the edges of dad’s garage.

The butterflies lumber away,
or drop clumsily to the ground.
Their wings are stripped,
their flight cancelled forever
in a world where only we mattered.

candy. They shouldn’t have stuff like that I think.

It was time to move on, with or without my prediction.

“Please hang the paper bag over this rake handle,” I said to my helper for the day. As she proceeded to do so Jana, the irate candy shopper, yelled, “Hey, that sack came from the grocery store where they have the metal box for candy money!”

My patience was gone. I was frustrated, but before I could express this another girl said, “We never go there because my mom thinks they charge too much.”

I gave up. There didn’t appear to be any way to save this lesson so I let it go. The wonderful interactive hands-on experience became a teacher-led demonstration. Not as meaningful for my students, but they were, at last, seeing a lever at work. After I was done, I noticed a little boy, who had been very interested and attentive, had his hand raised. My faith renewed, I smiled and said, “Yes, John, do you have a question?”

“Yeah, what happened to the rest of that rake?”