

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Building and maintaining a classroom web site serves many purposes. First, the existence of a classroom web site provides for parents a 24-hour medium of communication. Parents and teachers alike know how difficult it can be to get a hold one another. Ask parents if they have ever had difficulty communicating with their children's teachers and one is bound to hear a resounding "yes" (and probably a few horror stories!). But with a classroom web site, parents can constantly have access to what is occurring in class. Additionally, many schools are not equipped with classroom telephones that have access to an outside line. It can be frustrating for a parent to have to leave with the secretary a message for the teacher that will be put in his or her box, and then wonder when, or if, the call will be returned. A web site equipped with the teacher's e-mail address can help solve this problem by providing an opportunity for round-the-clock communication.

Second, teachers can use a classroom web site to improve students' writing by having them create the content of the site. Why should the teacher tell the parents what their children are doing in the class when the children can do it themselves? Allowing the students to write the updates for the classroom web site can provide the opportunity to improve their writing, both in the areas of grammar and summarizing skills. Additionally, the use of a word processor

when writing such updates can help improve even more the quality of the students' writing.

Lastly, publication of students' work on the Internet gives to students an audience for their hard work and creativity. Rather than solely writing for the teacher, students are given the opportunity for millions to view their writing.

Parent Communication

Children learn best when the school and home work together (Hoerr, 1997). Whether students are in kindergarten or seniors in high school, involved parents make a difference. Freeman and Karr-Kidwell (1998) found that schools with highly involved parents tend to reach higher standards than schools with lower levels of involvement.

It is often heard how disconnected some high school students are when it comes to their education. Research has shown that American parents of high school students are just as disengaged from school as their children are. Only about one-fifth of parents consistently attend school programs and 40 percent never do (Newman, 1997/1998). Why is this?

One contributing factor to parents' lack of involvement in their children's education is time. Parents today are busier than in any period in history. Thirty years ago, the majority of families consisted of a stay-at-home parent who had the opportunity to be an active participant in the school experience. Today, this family model is in the minority. While parent/teacher conferences are an opportunity to communicate a belief in the value of a successful partnership

between home and school (Studer, 1993/1994), work schedules often make it difficult for parents to meet face-to-face with teachers to discuss their child's progress in school. Since time is so precious, teachers must find new ways to reach out to parents (Hoerr, 1997).

What can teachers do to improve the relationship between parents and teachers? Ribas (1992) has many suggestions. First, teachers must be good listeners. Rather than having a set agenda, teachers should first allow the parents to share anything they feel might be valuable for the teacher to know. Studies have shown that adults are involved in communicative activities about 70 percent of the time. Of this time, 32 percent is spent talking and 42 percent listening, but usually not very well (Studer, 1993/1994).

Other suggestions from Ribas (1992) include:

- having telephones available;
- offering evening conference times;
- establishing regular office or call-in hours;
- sending home a classroom newsletter (Vann, 1992);
- taking advantage of Parents' Night.

In addition to these suggestions, Newman (1997/1998) offers her advice on how to help foster good communication with parents. She states that following these steps can help ensure a happy and successful school year:

- Get to know your child's teacher when school begins
- Become familiar with the books and homework

- Ask questions about lessons and what the teacher expects
- Find out about scheduled tests and how you could assist
- Ask about your child's relationship with peers as well as with adults
- Share any information that might help the teacher better understand the child
- Decide with the teacher how you can be an effective home-partner
- Continue to keep in touch with the teacher

Every one of the above suggestions can, at least in part, be implemented through the use of a classroom web site. Teachers can post information about themselves on an "About the Teacher" web page, thus allowing the parents to get to know their children's teacher. Homework and upcoming tests and events can be posted, keeping the parents in touch with what is occurring in the classroom. Classroom newsletters can be viewed online. And probably most important, the widespread availability of electronic mail (e-mail) can provide for parents the opportunity to communicate with their children's teacher at their convenience, and in a non-threatening manner. E-mail provides an informal medium of communication, and for the most part, parents seem to prefer informal relationships with their children's teachers (Jesse, 1997). And this form of communication works both ways. Since it is often difficult for teachers to respond to parents' phone calls during normal school hours, e-mail responses can be made at the teachers' convenience.

Student Writing and Technology

With the increased availability of computer technology, both at home and in the schools, the question must be asked, "Can computers help students improve their writing?" While research on the subject has not pointed to a definite "yes" or "no" answer, some researchers have reported on the positive effects computers, more specifically word processing programs, can have on children's writing. The following three studies attempted to examine how using computers can affect children's writing.

Grejda (1992) sought to examine the effects of word processing on the holistic writing quality and revision patterns of sixth grade students. The subjects of the study included 66 sixth grade students (23 girls and 43 boys) and three classroom teachers. The students were enrolled in a school in a rural community. Based upon the Language Scale of the Stanford Achievement test, the students' overall language achievement scores ranked at the 79th percentile.

The participants of the study were randomly assigned to one of three revision treatment groups: paper and pencil, word processing, and a combination of the two techniques. Instructors provided the students in the word processing groups with training in how to use the word processing program. Instructors presented to all students a standard composition and asked them revise it. In addition, the students were also required to write and revise an original composition.

Results of the study showed that the word-processing students performed consistently better than other students did. Those students were more successful in revising existing as well as original writing, and they made more revisions to their work. Although the study did not provide significant evidence that the holistic writing quality improved through the use of word processing, the study did present evidence that editing skills can be improved via word processing.

While Grejda (1992) looked at word processing's effect on students' revision skills, Cheever (1987) examined the effects of using a word processor on the acquisition of composition skills in fourth grade students. The researcher selected seven fourth grade classes. Three of the classes used the word-processing program Magic Slate for at least one 4-minute session per week for an entire school year. The other four classes participated in a traditional composition curriculum without the aid of word processors. Cheever administered pre- and posttest pen and pencil writing samples to the control group and word processing writing samples to the experimental group. Randomly selected samples were scored for length of text, a holistic rating, convention errors, and spelling errors. Scores were then analyzed by ability. Observations were also made to determine the number of revisions that were made by students in both groups.

The researcher found that the experimental group showed substantial improvement in both quality and quantity of writing. Convention errors and spelling errors reduced by 70.4% and 60.2%, respectively. Probably the most

significant finding was that students with the lowest ability scores were the ones who showed that greatest reductions in convention and spelling errors.

In a similar study, Moore (1987) wanted to investigate the effects of using word processing in a developmental writing program for 204 fourth and fifth grade students. Moore focused on the program's effects on writing quality, students' attitudes towards writing, and revision characteristics. A pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was followed. Students were assigned to either the experimental (used word processors) or control (did not use word processors) group using the matching technique. The researcher examined both quantitative (writing samples, attitude surveys, and assigned compositions) and qualitative data (observations, interview, and questionnaires).

Results indicated that students using word processors significantly improved their writing quality more than students not using word processors, although attitudes toward writing were not significantly different for students with and without word processors. When the scores of eight students (four who used a word processor and four who did not) were analyzed to determine the word processor's effect on revision characteristics, results showed that the four students using word processors made significantly more revisions and significantly more meaning-related changes when compared to their peers. The findings of this study support other recent research suggesting that word-processing is a powerful for not only creating, but for more quick and easy revising.

As the previous three studies revealed, the computer can be a powerful tool to help students improve the quality of their writing. School technology budgets will continue to increase, and computers will become more and more accessible. Teachers must take advantage of this new and constantly improving method of bettering students' writing. With so many word processing programs on the market, it can be difficult for teachers to decide which ones to use. Oehring (1993) and Clearinghouse Online (<http://www.clearinghouse.k12.ca.us>) recommend the following software titles:

- Imagination Express: Destination Castle, Edmark Corporation, Redmond, Washington, \$59.95, grades 1-6.
- Language Solution – ESL; 1-12 Interactive, Inc., Encino, California, \$99.95, grades 3-12.
- MicroWorld's Language Arts, Logo Computer Systems, Inc., Stafford, Virginia, \$79.00, grades 4-8.
- Kid Works, Davidson, Torrance, California, \$89.95, grades pre-K-4.
- Storybook Weaver, MECC, Cambridge, Massachusetts, \$69.00, grades K-6.
- Story Tailor, Humanities Software, Inc., Hood River, Oregon, \$29.00, grades K-3.
- Super Young Authors, RCP Software Development, La Mirada, California, \$159.00, grades 2-6.

So how can maintaining a classroom web site improve student writing?

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the content of the web site can be written by the students. Why should the teacher summarize what is taking place in the classroom when such a valuable opportunity for writing can be placed in the hands of the students? And, if the resources are available, the utilization of word processing programs like the ones listed above can only further help students improve their writing.

Publication of Student Writing

If asked what the major purpose of writing is, most would probably give a one-word answer – communication. When the spoken word is not an option, writing is required. Newspaper reporters write to convey information to the masses. Authors write for many reasons: to share their experiences, to teach, and to entertain. An author's audience can range from toddlers who are just learning to read, to elderly women who love good mystery novels. In school, children too often write to only one audience – the teacher. So how can teachers expand a student's audience? Publish their work (Staas, 1993).

Some of the most frequent questions of students during a writing assignment are "How many words does it have to be?" and "If I fill up the front side of the paper, is that enough?" (Pinney, 1991). This attitude is common in students because they many times don't feel a purpose in their writing. Pinney (1991), like thousands of other elementary school teachers, constantly heard these kinds of questions. That was until he involved his class in a national

telecommunications writing project in which students in one class exchange their writings with another class via electronic mail. By doing so, Pinney's students were given the opportunity to use their writing to communicate with someone other than their teacher. After a few months in the program, the questions changed from the above-mentioned kind to questions like "How do you think they'll like my use of figurative language?" and "Could we send them a message to hurry and write back?"

A similar experience involved an Internet exchange between a second grade class and a group of preservice teachers. Curtiss and Curtiss (1995) wanted to improve the writing of second grade students, as well as give preservice teachers an opportunity to interact with some would-be students. Instead of simply writing on the computer, the second grade students composed e-mail letters about books they were reading, and sent them to the teachers-in-training, who in turn responded. The experience helped the elementary students' writing, reading, and comprehension because they had to read and make sense of the letters they received, and they had to think about the book one more time (Curtiss & Curtiss, 1995).

Teachers often have their students write book reports. Instead of stopping at displaying the students writing on a bulletin board, why not publish their work on the Internet? The advent of the World Wide Web as a medium for children's publication has opened up a venue for real world publication (Keiner, 1996). Book Nook (<http://www.schoolnet.ca/arts/lit/booknook/>

index.html) is a database of book reviews written by children (Everhart, Meierdiercks, Hall, & Grace, 1996). Why not reward students who have created exceptional reviews by placing their work online?

The benefits of publishing a student's work on the Internet can be best illustrated in the attitudes toward writing of a nine year-old girl in England. Keiner (1996) explained that "Karen" was a talented but reluctant writer. In an attempt to improve Karen's attitude toward writing, her mother purchased a multimedia computer with access to the Internet. She began to show Karen a number of web sites dedicated to publishing children's writing and artwork. One of these sites was a U.S.-based site called KidPub (<http://www.kidpub.org>). This site is accepts all stories submitted by or on behalf of children and young people under the age of 16, and publishes them, each on its own web page. At the end of each story's page, a counter displays the number of times the story has been read in the format of "This story has been read n times."

It was the counter that intrigued Karen. After four months of visiting KidPub, Karen agreed to submit one of her stories she had written in school. Unbeknownst to Karen, her mother took on the role of publicist and circulated the URL (web site address) of Karen's story to closed e-mail groups of which she was a member.

When asked to predict the number of readers who would access her story on the first day of publication, Karen expected 10 or 11. By the end of the first day, 39 readers had logged on to read her story. By the end of the first week,

more than 100 readers had taken a look at her story. The impact of the number of responses surprised and delighted Karen. For the next several days, Karen, with the help of her mother, responded to dozens of e-mails she received from readers. The publication of her story on the Internet had visibly had the desired effect of making Karen feel very positive about her writing and intrigued and interested by others' responses to it.

Another example of a publication possibility exists in primary classrooms during the seasonal practice of having young students write to Santa Claus. Once again, instead of stopping after the writing of the letters, teachers can e-mail the letters to a group of teachers or older students who have volunteered to send responses (Oakes, 1996). Staas (1993) states that writing letters to the editor of a local newspaper about current issues is another great way to get a student's work in print. There are also several web sites dedicated to the publication of students' writings.

Summary

The Internet can be a powerful tool of a teacher. It can be used to communicate with parents and it can help improve both the quality of and attitudes toward writing. One of the newest forms of Internet communication that teachers can incorporate into their teaching is a classroom web site. With the presence of a classroom web site, teachers can communicate to parents and improve students' writing at the same time. Parents can have the opportunity to

communicate with their children's teacher whenever they want. And students have the ability to see their work broadcast to millions, not just their teacher.