By the time I get finished teaching my last middle school class of the day, I can see the exhaustion in my students’ faces as they await the final bell. For most of them, they have shuttled through six distinct classrooms with six distinct teachers in six distinct subject areas making sure they have shown up to the right room with the right homework.

My school has many engaging and passionate teachers who do their best to keep these students alert and actively participating, but my own exhaustion clues me into the view that most students are not hungry for any more class at the end of the day. This routine, as we all know, plays itself out for 180 days a year.

When students go home, they are looking for something else. And they are not just turning on television these days, it seems; they are also logging onto their computers. Pew’s study of teen Internet usage (Lenhart, A., Purcell, K., Smith, A., & Zickuhr, K., 2010) found that 93% of teens are online, 63% of them go online every day, and 73% use social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter. A different Pew study (Lenhart, A., Ling, R., Campbell, S., & Purcell, K., 2010) found that an average teen sends approximately 50 text messages on their phone each day and that 54% of teens report texting daily.

These teens log into an online world where they meet many of the same students that they spent all day sitting next to and sharing the same opinions that they have probably whispered throughout the day. The difference is that the teacher is gone; in fact, all the adults, including parents, are gone. Whether it is Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, or video chats via Skype, my students have found a way to express themselves in ways that are authentic to them in a space that is not supervised by adults. With that is the freedom to state, often in all capitals with multiple exclamation points, what they have really wanted to say and feel and perhaps been coached not to do in their English classes.

Launching the Program

Actually, Friending You Is My Job

As a language arts teacher on special assignment, my job was to work exclusively on incorporating technology into the English curriculum. I was charged with harnessing the appeal of Facebook to motivate and, we hoped, improve school writing. Last year, my suburban San Diego school district received a federal technology grant that bought four mobile laboratories for each middle school; the labs were filled with class sets of inexpensive netbook computers that are just powerful enough to word process and surf the Web, which seems to be what most people do on computers, anyway.

In talking to students between classes and as I began accepting some of my former students’ friend requests, it became clear why students were so hooked. Facebook was just a quick and easy medium to share thoughts with a wide group of friends. Writing informally online provided them a freedom that they rarely had in classes. Voice mattered. Response mattered. And by response, it wasn’t, “I’ll read your essay sometime in the next three weeks and get it back to you with
comments and a grade.” It was the immediacy of texting or hearing from one of your numerous friends within minutes, if not seconds, after you posted. The response meant your ideas mattered, that your writing mattered. Writing was not private and solitary, but social.

For our students, the very act of posting a status update to Facebook or other social networking site is a conscious choice to share an idea and risk embarrassment with a selected audience of a person’s self-selected “friends.” Whether admitting a fondness for singing in the car or drawing out an observation about poor cell phone etiquette, Facebook posters are often trying out an idea that has been percolating in their minds in the hopes that it resonates with others. They are taking that leap of faith to risk a part of themselves with a wide, but relatively safe, audience; isn’t that the very hope that we try to instill as writing teachers? How many times do we say that authors notice the details through careful observation and reflection? How often do we need to tell our developing writers to write small—to draw rich and imaginative ideas out of events that students think are too insignificant to write about?

Taking Our Leap of Faith

After doing our research and obtaining the software (we use a free open source e-portfolio application called Mahara, available at mahara.org, which has a Facebook-like social networking wall and friending), we were still hesitant to introduce it. We worried about all the mischief and mayhem that might potentially ensue. At least in our classrooms, we could see all the interactions. Online, it was the wild, wild west.

It was all set up. After a few months, we actually turned it on. A week later, we told people about it. Kids loved it. They were on that very night—personalizing and customizing their profile pictures with athletes and silly pet poses and adding their friends as friends. All their non-school preoccupations were suddenly expressed in oversized images and gaudy hot pink text that blinked. It wasn’t grammatical or punctuated very much, but kids communicated. They understood each other, shared jokes, asked each other questions and got responses, shared what interested them, and shared themselves. Not all parents were thrilled, but very few actually complained. Low and behold, the sky did not fall down, and kids actually helped each other on homework and asked questions on their teachers’ walls.

Finding Technology’s Place in Learning

Shaping the District’s Writing Social Network

Once the social networking site got off the ground, student engagement was high, but I felt a little bit like a grandparent enticing students with the candy and toys of the technology. Kids loved computers and sharing pictures online, but for what? It felt like we were borrowing students for short bursts of time only to have them return to their teachers to mete out the “real work” of reading and writing. In my view, technology has to be more than a gimmick; it must extend learning, not simply recreate a typical English class online. Too often, the gadgetry crowds out critical growth in reading and writing. As Troy Hicks (2009) writes, “Technology is not an add-on or bag of tricks for writing teachers for the twenty-first century; instead, technology and writing must be seen as intricately intertwined” (p. 134).

We set the parameter that every student would have at least one portfolio of their best work across multiple genres of writing, giving each student a purpose beyond soliciting friends. The software allowed our students to share their electronic portfolios with as many or as few students as they wished, although similar password-protected online portfolios could be created using
wikis or even blogs. (Popular free educational social networking sites with password-protected access for safety include edmodo.com and wecollaborize.com, and free wiki hosts include pbworks.com and wikispaces.com.)

How Online Sharing Restructures Feedback and Response

Grant Wiggins (1998) has written, “This is more than just the truism that writers need feedback. The best writing, like all learning, only happens through a constant and disciplined escape of self to explore the consequences” (p. 34.) Technology can expedite this in potentially powerful ways. The comments, feedback, shoutouts, and general response from others, typically their friends, are what have students rushing home to check their email notifications.

Our students are seeking an audience, and we know that writing is almost destined to be ineffective if written only for the teacher. By allowing our students choice in writing, we discovered expertise in subject areas ranging from origami to owls, gave a space for spontaneous volumes of original poetry, and found thematic multigenre compilations of animations, video, writing, and images—a Beowulf re-set in the Jersey Shore or a diary of overly competitive swimming.

At the same time, as language arts teachers, we realized that we needed to expand the repertoire of posts on typical social networking sites beyond short text abbreviations and flashy graphics. We had to teach that while “hey! could you check out my page and some of my work and maybe leave a comment telling me what you think? I’d really appreciate it! thx =P” was a start, it might not be as useful as “Do you, as a reader, know enough about my father?” Using modeling and guided practice as our most potent tools, we elevated what constituted useful response while also ensuring the students’ initial constructions expanded and evolved. We felt like Nancy Som-

CONNECTIONS FROM READWITETHINK

Revision and Reflection

This article drives home the importance of providing feedback on pieces of writing. Students can start this process by thinking critically about their writing on a specific assignment before submitting their work to a reader. Students write reflective letters to the teacher, sharing their own thoughts on the piece that the teacher is about to read. This lesson explains the strategy and provides models for the project, which can be adapted for any grade level and any writing project. It may be completed only for major assignments or on a more regular basis with all composition that students do.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/draft-letters-improving-student-902.html

Students in the article were also encouraged to consider the audience for their pieces. In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Writing for Audience: The Revision Process in The Diary of Anne Frank,” students will review Anne Frank’s original journal entries and compare them to her revisions, thus witnessing the revision process in action. Students will be able to identify what she revised as well as her intentions behind the revisions. Students will assist one another with these revision strategies and will produce a journal entry for an audience other than themselves.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/writing-audience-revision-process-30656.html

In “Weekly Writer’s Blogs: Building a Reflective Community of Support,” students analyze example writer’s blog entries, then begin the habit of writing their own weekly entries that focus on the writing they have done over the past seven days. These reflective assignments ask students to think about their progress on writing activities and to project how they will continue their work in the future, while communicating with classmates about the same.

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Writers (1980), “[W]e need to sabotage our students’ conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent” (p. 345).

We felt some level of success when, in maintaining the site at odd hours on the weekends, we always saw some students logged in and clearly not for a school assignment. More signs of success came in talking with teachers who had their students do end-of-semester compilation pages and return to assignments that they had forgotten were assigned. In having all the students post, avenues opened up for sharing across classrooms and across schools. Open access showed varying levels of writing products across the same grade level, prompting teachers to learn from each other. Along with finding undiscovered troves of completely student-initiated writing, perhaps the most rewarding experiences came from teachers messaged by students from previous years taking pride in a new piece they had written and wanted to share. Positive buzz helped the program spread into the district high schools, and there was growing interest from the elementary schools. For once, new students came to teachers with language arts work that wasn’t condensed into a single numerical measure.

Currently, nearly every one of the almost 4,000 middle school students in our district maintains an online writing portfolio of their work, which can be shared with any teacher or student within our district. Instead of a manila folder that lies dormant in a file cabinet awaiting its inevitable trashing on the last day of school, students’ writing work is dynamic, accessible from any online device, and available to teachers and peers: past, present, and future.

Discussion

Imagine that you could get virtually every student in your class, even boys, to agree to carry around a journal/notebook where they would document and reflect upon every event that they deem important or noteworthy in their lives, sometimes with accompanying video and pictures. For these events, they agree to collect varying and corroborating perspectives from other participants. You also make the stipulation that they must write down details and reflections about the event as quickly as possible, sometimes during the actual event itself but not longer than 24 hours after it has occurred. Once they have done that, they would agree to make sure that they get a small group of peers to review and respond to their initial writings.

This seems like a dream scenario for a writing teacher who has been resorting to brainstorm lists, webs, and writing prompts to wring out a writing topic of genuine student interest instead of one that masquerades as such in an effort to appease a teacher or maximize a grade. This is not a hypothetical scenario but one that, as the Pew statistics suggest, is happening for more and more of our students. As they document and chronicle their lives with their high-powered cell phones and computers, they reflect and solicit responses utilizing social networking Web applications. So many of us as teachers are almost preconditioned to devalue our students’ informal writing and the inordinate amount of time they spend using social networking (not doing homework) that we have perhaps failed to capitalize on its possibilities.

As language arts teachers, we might be best served to consider social networking postings as brainstorms, writing rehearsals, and practice in the art of constructive response. Our job, as writing teachers, is to take students’ authentic experiences and hard-learned truths and give them the training and practice they need to flesh out their work into convincing narratives and ironclad arguments. Social networking can help, even if we don’t have the expertise or temperament to set up our own online systems.

Accomplishing this can be as simple as having students bring in writing topics or strands from what they have written on Facebook walls.
A narrative can be based on an event with an especially long discussion thread, where students can authentically see the value of perspective by studying how various players see the same event through much different lenses. A persuasive essay may be composed by examining the feedback they have left on other people’s updates and adding evidence to support truths they seem to continually fall back upon.

If our students are going to voluntarily agree to keep a running journal of writing ideas, shouldn’t we let them bring it to class every once in a while?

References

A technology liaison with the San Marcos Writing Project, Allen Teng is in his tenth year as a seventh-grade language arts teacher at Woodland Park Middle School and is a Ph.D. student in education at Claremont Graduate University and San Diego State University.

Submission Information for Student to Student
The Student to Student feature of *Voices from the Middle* has been a popular and motivating element of the journal since its inception. Wendy Ranck-Buhr, principal at the San Diego Cooperative Charter School, serves as department editor for this feature. She invites teachers from across the nation and the world to submit their students’ book reviews. We know from teacher feedback that these reviews motivate students to write with care, help readers pick out new books, and generally support our students as readers and writers.

Please send all Student to Student submissions to vmstudenttostudent@gmail.com. Keep in mind that reviews should be 200 words (including bibliographic information), the student’s grade and school must be identified, and the book reviewed should not have appeared in *VM* within the last three years. (For an easy reference, check the annual indexes appearing in every May issue, both print and online.)

We hope you will encourage your students to write reviews for consideration. Publication has made a difference in so many student lives!