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Abstract

Introduction: "We didn't have to do any work!" was the greatest response to the question asked of fourth and fifth-grade students on what they liked best about the month long cross-age buddy reading and blogging project. A major challenge of candidates and university faculty in teacher education is how to effectively develop children's digital literacy skills.

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Beth Walizer
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Introduction

“We didn’t have to do any work!” was the greatest response to the question asked of fourth and fifth-grade students on what they liked best about the month long cross-age buddy reading and blogging project. A major challenge of candidates and university faculty in teacher education is how to effectively develop children’s digital literacy skills. Since our society has become a technology savvy place, children of all ages have taught themselves how to use different types of technology and intertwined the technology into their lives. The research of Glewa and Bogan (2007) looked at the “purpose of learning how to use technology to enhance learning in literacy” (p. 42). Their research showed that offering students digital technology could replace traditional literacy tools within a school-based program. Therefore, schools play an important role in developing children’s digital literacy skills. For blogging to be significant in developing students’ digital literacy skills, candidates must recognize the effective use of technology, be aware of current thinking on the use of technology, and become familiar with core curriculum software (International Society For Technology in Education, 2002).

The International Society for Technology in Education (2002) shares that there is a performance profile that includes promoting student conceptual understanding and technology competence to meet the curriculum standards and the school community creating a setting focused on learning for all members of the community. Additionally, ISTE sets forth conditions in building an ideal environment to support candidates, teachers, administrators, and parents, which include the following:

- Shared vision for technology use in the classroom
- Access to current technologies, software, and telecommunications
- Skilled educators that model technology use that facilitates student learning
- Professional development to aid in applications of technology of teaching
- Technical assistance which requires field experience and is on site to ensure reliability of teaching resources
- Current standards and curriculum resources that require technology based resources to meet content standards
- Student centered teaching which allows a variety of technology enhanced activities
- Assessment where master teachers work with candidates to assess the

effectiveness of student learning and technology

- Community support so candidates teach in partner schools where technology integration is modeled and supported
- Administrative policies that support and reward the use of technology (pp. 256-257)

A study conducted by Drexler, Dawson, and Ferdig (2007) examined the collaboration of preservice teachers blogging with third-graders and their classroom teacher. The study based on writing, technology, and social studies standards, looked at whether 1) collaborative blogging helped improve the students' attitudes about writing, 2) collaborative blogging with the preservice teachers increased the students' motivation to write, and 3) shared blogging helped the students to develop their writing skills and also supported related skills. The outcome showed an increase in constructive statements from students. Furthermore, the authors discovered that the research and organizational skills of students improved as the writing process continued.

According to Slavin (1990) there is an agreement among researchers that cooperative methods have positive effects on student achievement. Even though achievement effects are not seen for all forms of cooperative learning, the effects depend on the implementation of cooperative learning methods. There are two essential elements required when implementing cooperative learning methods, positive interdependence and individual accountability. In a study conducted by Samway (1995), the researcher reported on engaging under-achieving, fifth-grade boys in an effective cross-age tutoring program that involved first/second-grade students and fifth/sixth-grade students, most of whom were English as nonnative language speakers. In this study, teachers witnessed compelling growth among the fifth/sixth-grade students as teachers and learners.

The dissertation of Franklin-Matkowski (2007) looked at the question "How do adolescents engage with in-school digital literacies?" The three specific questions, which helped to focus the study on particular issues rather than a broad topic, included the following: "What does blogging mean for students' writing? What does blogging mean for students' responses to literature? What does blogging mean for student's thinking?" During the study Franklin-Matkowski focused on what the students wrote and the quality of their writing instead of how much the students wrote. Franklin-Matkowski's dissertation states, "Blogging became a form of consistent writing practice" (p. 119).

Franklin-Matkowski (2007) realized that students were blogging in two different ways when students 1) were prompted by a teacher to answer questions or 2) were not prompted by the teacher. The results showed that teacher prompted questions resulted in students simply answering the questions and not delving deeper to explore and find more information. But students starting discussions over the topics where they had

an audience besides the teacher influenced them to work harder. The blogs improved the students writing ability, which showed a variety of levels of comprehension. As the blogs progressed and the students gained comfort in blogging, it was clear to Franklin-Matkowski that thinking skills were strengthened in the unprompted blogs more regularly than the blogs with prompted questions from the teacher.

According to the research of Kajder, Bull, and Van Noy (2004), blogs have introduced a new generation to journaling. Students are using blogs for their own personal journals because of the accessibility and immediate reactions. Upon completion of an exit survey conducted by Kajder, Bull, and Van Noy, the students were in agreement that they liked this new form of writing and journaling. Huffaker (2004) stated, "Weblogs provide excellent opportunities for educators to advance literacy through storytelling and dialogue" (p. 96). According to Huffaker, blogs help students to learn to read and write well formed thoughts. Through blogging, students are able to develop and strengthen their self-expression and cooperative learning skills. In addition, blogging helps students to become comfortable with computers and the software.

Statement of Problem

Instructors in the Department of Teacher Education at Ft. Hays State University face the challenges of teaching candidates how to effectively develop children's digital literacy skills and meet the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards for the English Language Arts (1998). The following NCTE/IRA Standards were addressed in the project:

- 4 - Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- 5 - Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- 6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- 12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

In the fall of 2005, Ft. Hays State University Office of the Provost implemented a university strategic planning goal to develop a mobile computing environment. The Instructional Technology Policy Advisory Committee (ITPAC) and the Provost's Council put forth a joint recommendation of a wireless, mobile computing environment

where faculty members and students would engage in innovative technology learning experiences. According to Ft. Hays State (2005), “This enhanced institutional vision is best realized through a mandated mobile computing initiative preceded by the completion of a ubiquitous wireless campus infrastructure and a performance-based faculty development program” (p. 1).

Ft. Hays State University Department of Teacher Education’s goal is to develop mobile computing use in teacher education classes and apply mobile computing in local school district classrooms. One of the key performance indicators of this goal is that candidates will integrate technology with teaching. The cross-age buddies reading and blogging project allowed candidates to meet the integration of technology with reading for enjoyment and writing across the curriculum through blogs.

Initial candidates in the College of Teacher Education and Technology at Ft. Hays State University were guided by a Conceptual Framework, which defined seven goals for professional educators. These goals are aligned with the Kansas State Department of Education (2001) professional education standards. In conjunction with the state standards, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2002), an accreditation agency for colleges of education, exercises some control over the quality of teacher preparation programs by requiring universities to provide evidence of the impact of candidate performance on pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade student learning. As outlined in the Conceptual Framework, candidates working toward becoming professional educators will be liberally educated, assume a professional role within the school, combine an understanding of academic organizations, pedagogical theory and research, provide a supportive environment for diverse learners, integrate technology in planning, designing, delivering and evaluating student learning, demonstrate knowledge of multiple assessments, and utilize self-reflection for professional growth.

To effectively develop children’s digital literacy skills and meet the NCTE/IRA requirements, the university and college initiatives, and the Conceptual Framework, candidates, under the direction of the university instructor, collaborated with local school district teachers and their students to explore the use of cross-age buddies reading and blogging.

Research Questions

The topic under investigation was the effectiveness of reading books receiving the William Allen White Children’s Book Award (Table 1) and blogging about what was read with a cross-age buddy. Utilizing a qualitative approach on 15 case studies, the following research questions were investigated:

1. Will students reflect positively in regard to their satisfaction of reading and cross-age blogging?

2. Will candidates reflect positively in regard to their satisfaction of reading and cross-age blogging?
3. Will reading and writing scores of students increase after reading and cross-age blogging?

Participants

A total of 15 candidates enrolled in a non-restricted teacher education Children's Literature course participated in the study. Two (2) fourth grade students, 13 fifth grade students, the fourth and fifth-grade classroom teachers, and the school librarian from an Elementary School in Hays, Kansas, along with a FHSU student teacher in the fifth-grade classroom also participated in the study. The assistant professor of the Children's Literature course conducted the study.

Eight (8) candidates, fifty-four percent (54%), out of the 15 candidates participating in the study were classified as freshmen; 2 candidates, thirteen percent (13%), were classified as sophomores; and 5 candidates, thirty-three percent (33%), were classified as juniors. Disaggregating those same candidates by gender, 5 candidates, thirty-three percent (33%), were males and 10 candidates, sixty-seven percent (67%), were females (Table 2).

Two (2) students, thirteen percent (13%), out of the 15 students participating in the study were classified as fourth-graders and 13 students, eighty-seven percent (87%), were classified as fifth-graders. Disaggregating those same students by gender, 8 students, fifty-four percent (54%), were males and 7 students, forty-six percent (46%), were females (Table 2).

Procedure

The principal at an Hays Elementary School in Kansas, which had received an Enhancing Education Through Technology: Technology Rich Classrooms – Laptops and Learning grant, was contacted and permission to conduct the study was readily approved. Prior to the buddies reading and blogging, the university instructor, classroom teachers, and school librarian met to level the William Allen White Children's Grades 3-5 award winning books and match them to the students' independent reading level and interests. Next, the university instructor partnered the students with the candidates and set up the blogs for the cross-age partners (Table 2). In order for the students to meet the candidates, a picnic meeting was held at Ft. Hays State University for the students, classroom teachers, candidates, and university instructor to meet and distribute the books to be read during the project. During the picnic meeting, each candidate told the student about the project in which they were going to be involved, introduced the William Allen White book, and assigned the first reading and blogging task.

The candidates began blogging the following week during the first 15 minutes of their Children's Literature class, which was held every Tuesday and Thursday throughout the semester. Students would reply to the candidates' blogs on Wednesdays and Fridays. At the end of the month-long cross-age buddies reading and blogging project a celebration meeting for all parties involved was held in the students' classroom at Hays Elementary School. After a light snack and beverage provided by the university instructor, the buddies shared their book and reflections over the project with others in the classroom.

Research Design

The assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education, in collaboration with local school district teachers, explored the use of candidates integrating technology with teaching and conducted research to measure its effectiveness among students and candidates. Utilizing a qualitative approach on 15 case studies, blogs were created for each set of buddies.

The cross-age buddies reading and blogging project was conducted during a month long period. The buddies, which consisted of a student and an candidate read the same books. The candidates established the number of pages the students should read throughout the month, determined specific vocabulary words to target, and developed low, middle, and high level questions to ask the students. candidates modeled correct spelling, grammar usage, and sentence structure for the students and students were expected to do their best in those areas.

Analysis of Data/Results

The topic under investigation was whether students and candidates would reflect positively regarding their satisfaction of reading and cross-age blogging. A celebration was held at the end of the month-long project. After a light snack, students and candidates shared the book they read with the group and students orally reflected over their experiences. Students' comments were recorded and showed that they reflected positively regarding their satisfaction of reading and blogging with a cross-age buddy. One student revealed, "I enjoyed my buddy. She is the sister I never had. We still blog today." Another student commented, "It's good to know that college students read the same books we do." One student observed, "My buddy will be a wonderful teacher and I love her attitude." At the end of the discussion, a student summed the project up by exclaiming, "We didn't have to do any work!" Other comments were similar, showing a positive response to the incorporation of technology through cross-age buddy reading and blogging.

After the reading and blogging activity, each candidate was required to write

a reflection over the satisfaction of reading and cross-age blogging. In addition, candidates were to comment on the effectiveness of teaching via a blog. Qualitative data were collected on the candidates' comments. One candidate noted in the final reflection, "Being involved with the buddy project was a great learning and teaching experience for me." Another candidate pointed out, "We had many good discussions over the book. As a future educator, I learned more on what to expect and how to be flexible." A candidate wrote, "Blogging with buddies was a challenging and rewarding experience." Another candidate recorded, "Using technology was beneficial for both of us." These comments reiterated the other responses. Overall, candidates were pleased with the project.

Administration and teachers reflected positively in regard to whether reading and writing scores of students would increase after reading and blogging with a cross-age buddy. Qualitative comments were shared and recorded. The building administrator stated, "Using technology enhances students' reading and writing skills. Blogging provides a new way of contemporary educational practice." A fifth-grade teacher remarked, "The students like writing/journaling now. Their writing, spelling, and grammar skills improved as the blogging progressed." The fourth-grade teacher mentioned, "Blogging could replace our traditional journaling." The student teacher said, "The students liked this new way of writing and journaling." The school librarian stated, "Blogging played important role in developing the children's digital literacy!" The university instructor commented, "The knowledge gained in this project for all involved was astonishing. Students and candidates increased their reading, writing, viewing, and thinking literacy skills along with improving their technology skills. The reflective comments from both the students and candidates ensured that all parties met some type of success during this cross-age buddy reading and blogging project."

Summary

In many cases, collaboration and interactivity capabilities within the virtual environment can actually provide a better experience than actually being there. In addition, in-person meetings rarely allow participants to talk privately (i.e. hold a private chat) without disrupting the flow of the presentation or leaving the classroom room. When productivity is the priority, sometimes it's better to participate virtually than in person.

Overall, all parties involved agreed that the project was a rewarding experience for everyone. The students and candidates reflected positively in regard to their satisfaction of reading and blogging with a cross-age buddy. Students' reading and writing scores increased but could not solely be accredited to reading and blogging with a cross-age buddy.

After reviewing the project reflections, recommendations for implementation and future research include that project time should be lengthened to possibly six weeks instead of a four-week period. Another recommendation would be to blog every day. One drawback of blogging every day would include illnesses and/or absences of either the student or candidate. It was also recommended that candidates ask more thought-provoking questions of the students.

In conclusion, research has led to generalizations that technology is valuable to the development and improvement of children's digital literacy skills. Attitudes of students and candidates are positive toward blogging. Not only do students become comfortable with computers through blogging, but they also develop and strengthen their self-expression and cooperative learning skills. Therefore, blogging fosters productive, synchronous or real-time collaboration.

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Table 1

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Table 2

Cross-Age Partners

Students (S)				Initial Candidates (IC)			
Number	Gender	Grade	Ethnicity	Number	Gender	Grade	Ethnicity
S1	F	4	W	IC1	M	FR	W
S2	M	5	H	IC2	F	FR	H
S3	M	5	W	IC3	F	FR	W
S4	M	5	B	IC4	M	JR	W
S5	M	5	H	IC5	F	FR	W
S6	M	5	W	IC6	F	JR	W
S7	F	5	H	IC7	F	JR	W
S8	F	5	W	IC8	F	FR	W
S9	M	5	H	IC9	M	FR	H
S10	F	5	H	IC10	F	SO	W
S11	M	5	W	IC11	F	JR	W
S12	M	5	H	IC12	M	FR	W
S13	F	5	H	IC13	F	JR	W
S14	F	4	W	IC14	F	FR	W
S15	F	5	H	IC15	M	SO	W