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Engaging Teachers in Digital Products and Processes: Interview Feature Articles

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Chapter 7

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Students sit in pairs interviewing each other--talking, laughing, taking notes with pen and paper. Computers begin to appear on tables, as students segue into drafting feature articles--those splash-of-color pieces that go beyond straight news in magazines and news source. Conversation diminishes to a soft hum, as focus shifts to the interplay of thinking, written notes, and the emerging text on the computer screen. Words continue to waft over the room as comments and questions pertaining to content and processes are directed to others. Computer screens are filling up with these words…

Thus begins, the first day of writing workshop in our teacher education courses.

Overview and Purpose of the Activity

An interview feature article is the first piece that our students create for the writing portfolios they will share with others on the last day of class. Engagement with this particular genre, as well as the processes needed to create the final piece, provides rich learning opportunities for students. Interviewing a classmate and creating a feature article offers a model for an informational writing activity that is aligned with the Common Core State Standards (2010) and can be accomplished or adapted in K-12 classrooms. Composing a feature article also engages students in experiential roles as writers, as they move through planning, drafting, revision, and presentation processes. For many students, it is the first writing that they have done in years that is not an academic paper. Loosened from the constraints of academic writing, students can play with words and formatting, and consider a more public audience--other than a course instructor. Students have noted that challenges of giving voice to both the interviewee and self-as-writer serves to deepen their understandings of voice as a trait of written products. Immersion in this the genre thus brings to the forefront the dynamic processes needed to create particular qualities within written products. Additionally, interview processes tend to build levels of trust that foster rich and natural social interactions around written composition that

support burgeoning communities of writers in our courses. Students converse, share photos, and laugh with each other about personal backgrounds and interests that go well beyond the interview that we set as the instructors.

Immersing students in the processes of interview feature article writing, also presents an opportunity for us to model the critical role of the teacher in guiding and scaffolding students' engagement in writing tasks and processes. Some aspects of guidance have remained the same over several years. For example, to model the scaffolding of idea-generation processes, we still have the whole class brainstorm and generate questions about what they would like to know about their classmates before the individual teams decide what 3-5 questions they would like to ask. We continue to teach focus lessons (Routman, 1996) on creating strong leads. Other activities have changed, however, as we work to keep current with new technologies and the sweeping changes to writing in our society (Leu, 2002). Models of interviews are now available through electronic links, rather than in hard copies of articles we made for students. We no longer take photos of our students in class and have them glue hard copies onto their final products. Instead, students find photos on Face Book sites, share photos through "bumping" their smart phones, and embed photos digitally in their pieces. Additionally, expectations for complex, multi-modal products (Leu, 2002) and concomitant writing processes have become central to the modeling and guidance we offer for the interview products.

Keeping current with the ways we write and how children are/should be learning to write with new technologies is integral to these changes. We have felt a sense of urgency, especially the last two years, to prepare teachers to teach writing effectively in the digital age. This particular assignment has been a wonderful jumping-off point in our courses for us to journey in concert with our students and each other (Tyselling & Laster, in press) towards greater understandings of writing processes and written products in digital environments.

How We Do It

This activity takes place over four sessions in our courses. Typically, around half of our course time each week is devoted to writing workshop.

Session One (45-60 minutes)

In the first session, students will come prepared to class having read on-line interviews as models for the genre. We currently use an interview in Question & Answer format with Judy Blume <http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/authors/interviews/JudyBlume.html> and a narrative interview with J.K. Rowling <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/

books/news/2007-07-25-jk-rowling_N.htm>. We begin by using the models to inductively identify the genre, its purposes, audiences, and key features. We compare and contrast the two formats, looking for similarities and differences, and sharing which we enjoyed more as a reader and why. The use of direct quotes is a critical key point in either format. Students record the information on their Genre Charts—a tool for them that they will add to across the semester.

Name of Genre	Purposes/Audiences	Key Features	Other

Figure 1: Genre Chart

Once we have established general characteristics of the genre, we discuss the specifics of the interviews feature articles that we will compose. We describe how they will work in partners to interview each other, their audience will be the class, and they have the option to compose in either format. We then discuss what makes a good, open-ended and probing question and together brainstorm questions that students feel their audience would like to know about classmates. The two of us typically will add in a couple of categories such as families (some of our students are parents) and "likes" if students do not mention these to help create a broad array of choices. Students then met with partners to interview each other. We let them know that they are to begin by identifying 3-5 questions that they would like to know about each other and that they are comfortable answering. We discuss the important-role of note-taking or recording conversations with smart phones or tablets, as they will be required to have direct quotes in their final products.

Session Two (45-60 minutes)

In the second session students complete their interviews with each other and move into drafting processes. At the beginning of this session, we do a very brief focus lesson (Routman, 1996) on leads—those beginning sentences that grab readers' attention. No matter which format students choose, they are expected to have a good introductory paragraph--with a strong lead. Using a range of models, we discuss and decompose (Grossman et al. 2009) what is entailed in a good lead. Specific tools for constructing strong leads, such as right branching sentences (Clark, 2008), are described.

We also review the features of each interview format as students begin to move into drafting. Bringing forth the voice of the interviewee and how to balance that with the voice of the writer

is an interesting point to discuss at this time.

Writing up interview notes into a feature article is a perfect activity for us to draw attention to the already-discussed recursive nature of writing processes. Inevitably students need to confer with their partners to get more information as they draft. Essentially, writers must return to prewriting (gathering more information) and then back again to drafting. Additionally, these interactions set the stage for social interactions during writing time. We grab this opportunity to encourage social interactions during writing about any issue to do with writing. We build on this all semester.

Furthermore, we interrupt students in the midst of drafting to reinforce previously discussed concepts, in this case the leads, by having students volunteer to share theirs with the class. We are thus able to provide further models and discussion to support students on-going drafting.

Session Three (45-60 minutes)
In the third session, students are expected to come to class with a first draft done in a regular paper format. They are also expected to have shared their draft with a partner either in class or via email. We ask them make sure their partners are comfortable with all the information and to invite feedback from their partners for revision and editing purposes.

Up until this point we have deliberately avoiding discussing requirements for formatting with the students. We again engage our students in a focus lesson, this time highlighting issues of formatting of the piece using the computer. Some or all of the formatting tools we demonstrate are already known to some of our students. Significantly, however, they are also new for many. Students reported that a lack of knowledge and fluency with these digital tools create barriers to their composition processes. We do a think-aloud using a PowerPoint we have developed with visual models to demonstrate our decisions as writers. For example, the first slide shows the text as a typical academic paper- in black, 12-point Times New Roman, with one-inch margins. The second slide demonstrates decisions we made to change font, size of font, and to use a different fonts for highlighting things like the headings. The slide sequence also demonstrates changes to font color, and number of columns, and embedding of photos in the text. We also show the complex templates for newsletters available in Word or Microsoft Publisher, how to access them, and how to convert straight, narrative-formatted text into columns and text boxes. In our discussions of these templates, we delve into issues of multimodal presentations, effective graphic design, and issues of what text would be highlighted in stand-out text boxes (e.g. direct quotes).

After this focus lesson, we challenge our students to develop their technology skills by trying a formatting tool that they have not used before. We conclude by setting some requirements for formatting the feature article: (1) use of at least two fonts, (2) embed photo(s), (3) try one technological writing formatting feature that is new to the writer. We leave the rest of the decision-making processes to our students.

Importantly, during and after this think-aloud formatting lesson, we are sure to debrief with our students what it is *their* students would need to be taught in order to expand their technological abilities with writing. We discuss ideas about instruction that "levels the playing field" for all students by providing familiarity with computer tools that some students will not have had opportunity to develop at home. Issues of drafting with pencil and paper before going to the computer or drafting directly into the computer format also arise. We discuss the need for developing writers to focus on developing ideas before trying to also manage either keyboarding or complex composition formats.

Session 4 (About 30-45 minutes)
For the last session, students bring their completed hard-copy feature articles to class. They will have already have also posted e-copies to our class "Face Book," housed on our Bb sites. Students hang up their feature articles on the walls of our classroom— spread out in a line. In some rooms, we have had to hang them in the hallway. Students then go around and read the posted feature articles. As they read, they must provide feedback to the writers, using sticky notes we give them. As this is the first public sharing of our writing, the comments can only be positive--what we call words to glow by. For feedback, we ask them to center their comments on the key features of this genre, such as leads, voice and other traits of written products that we have learned about, and the formatting. Since there is not enough time for them to read every piece, we ask them to make sure that every classmate will end up with at least three comments from peers.

Students reading and providing feedback

We then ask students to partner-up and privately respond with feedback that provides *words to grow by*. Feedback and suggestions need to be *invited* by the author, again on a specific aspect of their feature article such as their lead, voice, or formatting. In this way, both students are engaged in assessment experiences--both for another and oneself. The first time we added in the critical feedback, we were a little nervous about our students' responses to it. However, the students talked at length with each other, even into their break time! We suspect that experiences with the positive sticky notes and the words *to glow by,* coupled with writer's control over type of feedback, provided a safe place for garnering meaningful feedback

Debriefing with students on the day's activities then follows. We debrief the public presentation of our articles. Despite the focus on positive feedback, there will still be students who admit to being uncomfortable about the public posting and with others reading their work and giving feedback. Looks of horror come over everyone's faces, if we even mention keeping these pieces up on the classroom wall for a week or so. As with the other aspects of this assignment, we seize opportunities to help our students make links to their future practices. In particular, we want to problematize ways that writing is shared in classrooms and how sharing is often dictated by teachers, as was the case in our class. The rich conversation the ensues allows us to describe experiences in which students have say in whether or not they wish to share their work publically. We talk about the multiple benefits of posting and sharing work in classrooms and hear writers' perspectives on both the public sharing and providing and receiving feedback. For instance, one student mentioned how seeing all the products, allowed him to, " Recognize the trait of voice in a piece over and over," so that he could really learn about it. Debriefing allows us to consider feedback processes and the critical role of the teacher in providing the words to glow by with their students, along with the *words to grow by*.

Additionally, we link our class face book to a hard-copy class book that teachers can put together, so that classmates can read about each other over the course of the semester. We then discuss and model ways in which K-12 students can share their writing in new ways, and potentially expand audiences from the classroom walls into student's homes, and communities, and even opportunities for global sharing (Leu, 2002).

Extensions

Technology: Over the years, we have altered or made extensions ourselves to this assignment. The focus lesson around technology is recent. We realized that we had given little thought to how teachers engaged in formatting processes as they completed these products-especially with technology. Early student products varied greatly--with some even turning in papers with

assignment headings typical of a college paper! Feedback from students indicated, that some were left bereft and upset when they saw the differences between their posted product and the complex technological products of others. We realized that models are critical, but not sufficient for effective writing instruction. Explicit instruction and teacher modeling are equally important. We, however, had left students without guidance to complete products new to them through novel composition processes: the very kind of practices that we admonish them to avoid in their own teaching! Obviously, the product formats still vary. But differences appear to be because of students' choices, rather than lack of knowledge. No one submits a feature article that looks like a college paper.

This activity could also be expanded in other ways around technology. For instance, expecting students to compose in a newsletter template, or creating a course blog site, in which the interviews are posted.

Assessment: Teachers could extend the assignment by focusing more specifically on assessment aspects of this assignment. For instance, students could develop rubrics or check lists for self-assessment that match up with key components of the genre and/or the expectations for leads, voice, fonts, photos, and trying out new technological tools.

Understanding writing processes/teacher roles: There are two main ways that instructors can extend understandings of teachers' roles in writing instruction during this activity.

1. The requirement of direct quotes in the feature articles provides a perfect opportunity to talk about stand-along-side focus lessons, which might be taught prior to or along with the process tasks of this activity, but not in such a way as to disrupt the flow of composition. For instance, a stand-along-side focus lesson that teaches about proper conventions of punctuation and capital letters in direct quotes could be a perfect extension lesson for this activity.
2. Both classroom teachers and teacher educators could use a graphic organizer (see below) with this activity to help students deepen understandings of writing processes. We have learned that broad understandings of process writing must be refined and situated both in specific genres and digital processes. Specific processes for writing this feature article are different from those we use in writing a cinquain poem. Likewise, digital composition processes demand knowledge of and use of keyboarding and other computer tools and presentation formats that can be multimodal in nature. Additionally, teacher educators can use this graphic organizer and accompanying discussion to

help teachers understand the role of the teacher in guiding and scaffolding students' engagement in writing processes through *focus lessons across writing processes*. Here is an example of a graphic we use with several of our pieces in our courses. We have included examples of processes used throughout this lesson.

	Prewriting/Planning	Drafting	Revision	Editing	Presentation
What did you do as a writer?	1. Learned about genre and its purposes/features 2. Learned about audience 3. Generated questions 4. Interviewed classmate 5. Took notes 6. Learned about leads 7. Decided on format	1. Thought about my information. 2. Tried writing a lead. 3. Thought about organization. 4. Wrote 5. Shared my lead with classmate. 6. Though about voice	1. Shared my draft with my partner. 2. Used feedback to revise	1. Read closely for spelling and punctuation errors. 2. Shared my draft with partner 3. Used feedback to edit	1. Learned how to connect narrative and digital formats using MS publisher. 2. Decided where to include photos 3. Decided on fonts for headings. 4. Posted my final product on the wall and on our class "Face Book."
What did I do as a teacher?	1. Genre focus lesson 2. Question focus lesson 3. Lead focus lesson	1. Worked one-on-one with students to answer questions and provide positive feedback. 2. Interrupted drafting to have students share leads	1. Facilitated student-student revision processes	1. Facilitated student-student revisions processes	1. Think-aloud modeling of formatting processes 2. Facilitated student public presentations

Figure 2: Combination Process and Instruction Chart here.

Examples

Below are examples of two final drafts of the feature article. These demonstrate writers' specific decisions around formatting.

Cassie Moulin

By: Amanda Farr

Cassie and her family at Senior Volleyball night.

"I had one teacher that really made a difference to me; I am still friends with her today."

Ingredients for Success

What do baking, volleyball, and a love of teaching have in common?

These are the things that make Cassie Moulin a well-rounded and determined woman. She strives to be a leader and works to inspire those around her.

Cassie was born in Boise. As a child she attended a small private school. She grew up in Eagle with her parents and older sister. Her sister is a high school math teacher, secondary trigonometry and calculus. Cassie says that, although her sister enjoys teaching math, following her lead is not in her future. "I like math, but not that much."

Cassie is currently a student at Boise State University pursuing a degree in Elementary Education. Her emphasis is in literacy and she expects to graduate in the spring of 2014.

Recipe for a Great Teacher

Cassie's decision to become a teacher comes from teachers that influenced her. In fifth grade, her teacher, Miss Kyle, changed her view on education. "I had one teacher that really made difference to me, I am still friends with her," Cassie says. Miss Kyle took the time to understand what level her students were at, rather than teaching one level of curriculum to the class as a whole. When reflecting on her experience as a student, she said "I wanted to be that for other students."

In addition to attending Boise State College of Education, Cassie has also spent a great deal of time with children in other settings. She has spent time teaching Sunday school and enjoys the time that she has spent with the children. She said, "I have a love for kids."

Cassie and her team showing spirit on the court. .

HOOKS UPS, HOBBIES, AND OTHER THINGS

BY RACHEL INGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH KERSTYN MARTIN

You know the phrase, "Father knows best"? Well the way Kerstyn Martin met her husband, Tyler, was a funny, "Father knows best" story. Tyler's dad was dating Kerstyn's best friend's mom. Tyler's dad really wanted to hook up Kerstyn and Tyler so he asked for Kerstyn's phone number. She didn't even consider that the reason he wanted her number was to give it to his son. He told Tyler that Kerstyn really wanted him to contact her so he did. They started texting and eventually went on a date. Now here they are happily married!

"I ALWAYS SAID I NEVER WANTED TO BE A TEACHER… BUT I HAVE A HEART FOR KIDS WHO STRUGGLE."

Kerstyn's hobbies include rock climbing, Frisbee, and hiking. Kerstyn told me she also likes going to a coffee shop and reading. She loves reading Stephen King and fantasy novels the most. Kerstyn also likes hanging out with Tyler who is an English creative writing major at Boise State University. He works for Domino's and is also a writer. In fact he is currently writing a fantasy novel. Kerstyn is very anxious to see the finished product. She said it's really good so far.

Kerstyn's immediate family includes three siblings (an older brother and a younger brother and sister) and her parents. Both her parents live in Boise. Her dad works for the state as a land specialist and her mother is a teacher. She also has a husky/ border collie mix dog named Domino. When I asked Kerstyn if she had any interesting relatives she said she has an aunt who is a brain surgeon! Kerstyn said, "She's ***crazy*** but intelligent."

Kerstyn is a special education major at Boise State University. When I asked her why she wanted to go into teaching she had a very interesting answer. She said "I always said I never wanted to be a teacher… but I have a heart for kids who struggle." This really piqued my interest because just about every education major I have talked to says they always wanted to be a teacher or they have always had a heart for teaching. It was also interesting because her mother is a teacher so you would think that would be why she chose that career. Kerstyn also said she wants to teach because she loves the constant change of teaching and she loves planning.

Kerstyn has many exciting accomplishments. She has played soccer in high school and college. In fact, her *freshman* year of college, she was awarded **Most Valuable Player!** Kerstyn still plays soccer for fun but is not currently on a team. She has also made the Dean's list at Boise State twice in a row. The most exciting accomplishment Kerstyn shared with me was that last spring she co-led a mission trip to Costa Rica for six weeks. This group shared the gospel with the students on one of the college campuses there! That is a lot of accomplishments for someone so young!

[Pick the date] [Edition 1, Volume 1]

Your Turn

In addition to the detailed activity above, we have learned some important points for successful engagement of our students as both writers and writing teachers that may be of use to you.

Writing with your students: If you wish to try this activity with your students, we first suggest that you involve yourself in creating a product in this genre as well. Writing with students and modeling that for them is important (Kaufman, 2009; Martin & Chase, 2010). In order to effectively model and provide important focus lessons, we had to take the time to write and reflect along with our students. Immersion in one's own composition processes on specific products reveals the challenges of composing in that genre. We found this is especially important for creating complex digital products. When we began to create products with our students, we realized how complex deciding on graphics to complement text can be. Something as simple as selecting a font can be a thoughtful decision, not to mention the complexities of adding and placing graphics or music/sound, as we do in other products. Even understanding that these

features should complement the text might be a concept foreign to students.

Overlapping writer and teacher roles: We have learned that it is essential for teachers to engage in experiences as both writers and teachers in our courses (Martin, 2009; Martin & Dismuke, 2012). The interview feature article is a typical assignment for K-8 classrooms—one that teachers can use in practice—but one that also engage our students at adult levels in order to foster development of powerful experiential understandings. This is a genre far-removed from the academic papers that typically have been the only type of writing most of them have done in years. Furthermore, this assignment works well to engage students in the enhanced social interactions that, in part, define new literacies (Coiro Et al., 2007; Leu, 2002). Engaging teachers in writing as purposeful social and collaborative activity is central to our writing courses.

Importantly, as teacher educators we model the active teacher role needed in effective writing instruction. We have become more explicit in modeling focus lessons across writing processes and providing opportunity for our students to engage in a variety of feedback modes. We have worked diligently to establish and model communities of writing and learning in our courses. We foster teachers' abilities to engage in collaboration and sharing across all aspects of process writing.

Equally critical, to our minds, are increased opportunities for students to make explicit connections between what they are experiencing as writers and what they can do as teachers. Our combination process/instruction chart is the latest example of fostering these connections.

Make Time for Explicit Technology Instruction: Finding time for new topics in already-filled teacher education courses is ever challenging. But we absolutely needed to add a class session to this activity that allowed us to fully model instruction around use of digital technologies. New technologies have opened up a wide array of possibilities for written representations, how those representations intersect with visual and auditory modalities (Coiro, Et al., 2009), as well as audience access. Feedback from our students' clearly indicates that the digital requirement of this piece have pushed their understandings:

> I used a new template in Word for the first time that was much more complicated than I was used to. It took me a while to get used to it, but in the end it was worth it and I was really proud of my final product. (Rachael)

> For the interview assignment, I experimented with using borders, text boxes, and multiple fonts to give my interview the appearance of an article that came straight from a newspaper or magazine. It was my first time playing around with this combination of tools in Microsoft Word, and I had a lot of fun creating this product. (Stefanie)

If we are to prepare teachers to teach writing effectively in the digital age, embracement and envisioning of new writing processes and written products need to begin in teacher education. Keeping current with the ways we write and how children are/should be learning to write with new technologies is integral to these changes. As one of our students reminded us, "…writing is more than just putting words on paper."

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