Disabling Assumptions

Differentiating Writing, Reading, and How We Respond to Writing

Long before the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) movement was a glimmer in a corporate CEO’s eye, good teachers have been differentiating instruction to engage all students in high-level intellectual tasks that motivate learners to read, understand, and write about a variety of texts. Good teachers also know that students need motivation and encouragement to revise their drafts. The following ideas for reading, writing, and responding to student writing can be used to differentiate lessons for students with individualized education plans (IEPs), but they can support everyone, thus reducing possible stigma for some students and increasing options for all. An additional benefit is that, in the implementation of these ideas, some of society’s disabling assumptions about how “reading,” “writing,” and “responding” are defined may need to be revisited.

Writing by Voice

Technology today offers a variety of composing choices. Recently, a teacher asked me what could be done about a student who had terrible spelling problems—problems bad enough to impede fluency and mistakes outrageous enough to damage the student’s credibility as a writer. I asked this teacher if the student had ever tried voice-to-text composing. The answer was no, which surprised me, given the sophisticated technologies widely available today.

All students should have access to the voice-to-text technologies that may help them produce better first drafts. It’s possible today to speak paragraphs into one’s phone (or tablet or laptop) and have it translate that speech into written prose that is close to what was voiced—with some tweaking for names or unusual words. The “their/there” problem is gone, as is the to/too/two confusion, mostly. Other spelling problems go away, too, as long as the program understands the word voiced. Yes, some confusions arise that need editing. And sometimes autocorrect presents its own issues. But many of the traditional spelling and homonym problems that have plagued some students for decades can be resolved by using voice-to-text programs on newer phones or computer programs. These tools are still expensive, sometimes beyond the financial reach of some students. And there are still some occasions when people need to be able to handwrite prose correctly. Some students, like all of us writers, may prefer handwriting or conventional word processing. But for students with language-related learning disabilities involving spelling and other word-related issues, these technologies may free them from soul-crushing spelling drills or embarrassing word mix-ups that are painfully obvious in their handwritten or word-processed papers. Even people who write easily by hand or conventional word processing may find that voice-to-text composing can alleviate back pain from too much computer sitting or reduce the likelihood of future carpal tunnel injuries from too much typing. If schools have not already done so, they should make voice-to-text technologies available for writers who want (or need) to try them out.

Text-to-Voice Reading

To build their vocabulary, background knowledge, and genre knowledge, students need to read a wide variety of texts. According to the CC Anchor Standards for Reading, they “must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts” (CCSS ELA Reading). If
their lives are busy like mine, they may not have the leisure to sit and process text in conventional eyes-on-print reading. Happily, there are many opportunities today to increase our reading—or rereading—even if we can’t increase the time we have to devote to it.

In addition to commercially developed audio books available today, there are also many screen reading and other text-to-voice programs that read digitized text aloud to students. The computer voices that do this reading are still evolving, but they’re much better than they used to be and are quite understandable. Since ELA students need to do more and more reading of all kinds of texts, we need to help all students find the best ways to process texts in a manner that is most efficient and convenient for them.

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I recently downloaded a free app to my phone called Capti Narrator. It reads aloud to me digitized articles, news stories, fiction, academic research, or essays that I find on the Web. It has an easy-to-use browser and play list, and it enables me to download—and then listen to—print writings from the Web that I would love to sit and read but can’t, because I just don’t have that much time to sit. Instead, I queue them up on my phone. Then, when I’m emptying the dishwasher, folding clothes, or walking around the block, I can play them through the device itself, a Bluetooth speaker, or ear buds. What has changed my life is that I can also play them in my car on my half-hour commute to and from work. Because I have an older car with a tape player (remember those?), I insert a ten-dollar gizmo into the tape player, hook it up to my iPhone, and hit my Capti playlist. (Newer cars may have Bluetooth.) The other day I read through my ears an engaging 45-minute feature from Billboard magazine about “How the Beatles Went Viral.” It was intellectual candy, but I never would have had time to read it sitting in a chair.

The default voice that comes for free on Capti is not bad, but other voices are available for a small fee. Another appealing feature is that it is easy to slow down or speed up the rate at which the text is read, so people in a hurry can speed it up, and people who need more time to process the reading, or who wish to relish the prose, can slow it down. The press release for this product says that soon this program will include the printed text with the audio, which will enable readers to see and hear the text at the same time, and listen at the pace they prefer. Being able to see and hear a text simultaneously (which can be done now simply by printing up the text) has enormous potential for use with ELLs, reluctant readers, students with certain kinds of learning disabilities, or for anyone trying to process a particularly complex text.

Responding to Student Writing, Orally and Visually

We can also use new technologies to vary and expand our modes of response to students’ writing. Sometimes when I respond to students’ mid-stage drafts, or when I grade their finished projects, I use something called “dynamic screen capture”: I bring the student’s document up on my screen, move the cursor over areas I want to discuss, and start talking about the draft. I scroll up and down, and I select certain sentences or words, all the while pointing out, orally, what’s going well and what needs some more work.

To record these oral comments as well as the video of the screen as I scroll through the document, I use a free program called Jing, which I first learned about from Chris Anson’s presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2011. As Anson pointed out at the time, these Jing videos seem to work best for commenting on students’ ideas, content, and organization, not for heavy copyediting of students’ writing (which should probably be avoided, in any case, for reasons too numerous to list here).

When I’m finished responding, I give the video a name and send it off to Jing, which instantly provides a link to the video. Then I send the link to the writer. That way, there are no huge video files sitting on either of our computers. What’s also great about these videos is that students have their project in front of them on the screen as they hear my voice talking about particular sections. They can play the video as often as they need to in order to help them rethink their draft, or to help them better understand their grades. As Ken Lindblom discovered when using Jing videos with...
his students, it’s important to have a balance of specific, positive comments mixed in with suggestions or critique. Because students are hearing their teacher’s voice, an overload of negative voiced comments can sound harsh. We know, too, from Donald Daiker’s research, that effective teacher commentary points out, very specifically, what is going well in the student’s paper, so that students will recognize what’s working and keep doing it. Sometimes teachers need to learn how to name these positive features so that students will also pick up helpful nomenclature.

These dynamic screen capture videos, with their visual and audio components, are useful for everyone who can see and hear, but they may be especially valuable for students with certain kinds of disabilities, or for students who respond well to multimodal approaches. With dynamic screen capture, writers can see the text in front of them, hearing their teacher’s voice commenting on it as they scroll through. It is interactive in the sense that they can pause the video or play it again if they need to.

Sometimes I add another component to the video, adapting an idea from Nancy Mack’s excellent article, “Colorful Revision: Color-Coded Comments Connected to Instruction.” When Mack responds to students’ drafts, she highlights certain sections and sentences, color-coding parts that work well, sections that need lots more work, areas that need light editing, and so on. Using some of her ideas, but adding my own spin, I sometimes mark up with the highlighting tool available in Word which sections I want to comment on. I do this before I start the Jing video. Like Mack, I highlight in green those sentences that are working well—and I say why. While she has a slightly different coding method, I highlight in yellow those sections I might want to know more about, and sometimes I use orange for those sections in which I’ve noticed a repeating error: run-on sentences, for example, or a pattern of non-deliberate fragments. I don’t point out every error, but I do a quick error analysis and use the color-coding to draw the writer’s attention to particular sentences with the same pattern of error. I make sure that my comments on these repeating errors do not outweigh my positive comments on the “good” sentences or phrases. I make sure that my comments on these repeating errors do not outweigh my positive comments on the “good” sentences or phrases, highlighted in green. I’ve not done a formal study on the results of these dynamic screen capture responses, but students have told me, anecdotally, that they find them helpful. In fact, some of my preservice English teacher students use this technology to respond to each other’s drafts, also experimenting with Mack’s color-coding.

In many cases, technologies that used to be expensive and difficult to get or set up are often a free app and a few clicks away. Through innovative use of these tools, we can help all of our students read more, write more, and get more usable responses from us regarding their writing. Putting these tools to work is a wise investment of our time, and of our students’ time.

Works Cited

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