

CompuWrite 2009

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- Reflection paper
 - Analysis of the experience in relation to background, outcomes, and learning
 - Evaluation of the Internship in relation to program goals and doctoral program

In May of 2009, I began researching software information for the programs to be used in CompuWrite Camp. Although I had used many of the software programs, some were new to me. I surfed the Internet to gather information to update the assistive technology portion of the CompuWrite Camp internship manual and the training PowerPoint. On June 5th the Interns gathered for a day of training. After introductions and presentations about the structure of the camp and duties of the interns, I gave a presentation on the software that would be use and included indications that would help interns know which features would help students with different difficulties. The interns had some time to use the software to complete several activities. After lunch the description of the research project for the writing strategy POW Tree was given. The interns were given contact information as well as directions on how to download trial versions of software. The intervening weeks would be dedicated to lesson planning, contacting parents, and investigating the software. Through e-mail I was able to answer questions about the software and help several of the interns find information that they needed.

Camp began on July the seventh with a flurry of set up and troubleshooting with the laptops provided. The IT technician, camp director, and I work at busy helping interns and students began using the technology. Students were introduced to Type to Learn, given icebreaker activities and taught how to use a variety of software programs with helpful features such as, word prediction, organization, cueing, visual aids, etc. Daily writing prompts and activities demonstrated development of writing skills.

At the end of four weeks students created poster boards with their creations. Parents, students, and interns, were greatly pleased with the culminating project. As a proud parent of a rising eighth grader whispered, with a tear trickling down her cheek, “He hasn’t been allowed to display his work before.” She explained that it had never been good enough yet his camp writing looked very good!

One great difficulty was discovered the second day as we realized that certain programs including Type to Learn would not retain data because of the program Deep-freeze. Any time the lap tops froze or were rebooted, students were required to repeat the pretest and any lessons they had previously done. Other programs such as Writer's Companion, Classroom Suite, and Draft Builder had the default save to the C drive which was subject to erasure. After a great deal of frustration and several weeks with some documents lost forever, we were able to circumvent the settings in Type to Learn, and students were able to resume lessons without redoing everything. However all data pertaining to each student was lost! Some of the programs allowed convoluted saving on thumb drives or in the thaw space. One intern was a volcano of frustration over the loss of data and documents because of the Deepfreeze program. After finding that Writer's Companion was so valuable to her students enabling them to get ideas out, visually see the connections and rearrange them easily, yet the benefits of Writer's Companion were lost because drafts were unable to be saved. She also had difficulties because only one computer could use the software at a time when she had three students who needed it. Other difficulties teachers found were that some software such as Read and Write, version 6 was so old that it did not give the true picture of that software's capabilities. Co:Writer was not working well with the version of word on the computers and kept freezing the machines causing more loss of materials and data! Some of the suggestions in the teacher interviews could have given us time to trouble shoot and resolve issues if they had been given more time to work on those computers and in that environment the week before the students arrived.

This experience helped me realize the importance of giving teachers assistive technology that is dependable and up-to-date to ensure successful integration into the writing process. Teachers in my own district are having some similar difficulties with the Deepfreeze software. It seems that many assistive technology software programs direct files to be saved on the C drive rather than being allowed to be directed to a safe place by the user. Both written work and data, which are vital

in documenting student progress, are lost to the teacher. When teachers are frustrated with software programs that work sporadically, are out dated, freeze, and/or loose data; they are more likely to abandon technology. Students who need technology are the losers.

One frustrated intern asked for help with a rising third-grader. Although the student could speak volumes, it was evident that trying to encode her thoughts was pure torture! She had great difficulty with the Type to Learn, being unable to get past the pretest. With great concentration she was able to type some words into sentences; however her tendency to distraction limited her writing to a few simple sentences. Her general knowledge was impressive for a child her age being able to employ vocabulary and expound on scientific and historical concepts of a student in fourth to sixth grade. This student required one-to-one attention in order to stay on task. She often complained that activities were either too hard or too boring for her. She would avoid tasks with frequent requests to go to the bathroom, get a drink, or eat a snack, yet conversations proved very stimulating and oral stories included great detail. Is it possible to transform this budding storyteller into a successful writer?

Pictures were an incentive to this student. As she spewed forth her story, I frantically typed up her words in the picture to text software. That evening I organized the pallet of resulting words. The next day she would use the pallet to write sentences for her story. Her first story consisted of 25 words in three sentences that contained five story components. When required to type without the pallet, very few words or sentences were produced. Even when using a mnemonic that included, who, where, when, what happened, what happened next, how did it end, out in the main character feel? And the pallet of words labeled with pictures this student was able to type stories including all components. The next week I tried a similar task but gave her a pallet with words only. As she typed pictures appeared over the words. Although she produced fewer sentences than when using the pallet with pictures, she continued to type much more and with a greater degree of accuracy in sentence structure than she had when trying to type words letter by letter. Having the

pallet helps her maintain on task behavior for periods of 20 minutes. Without the pallets, this student needed constant cueing to remain on task for even a few minutes.

From the beginning, I have had an interest in the effects of using assistive technology with reluctant writers. Current research has investigated the effects of word processing and features such as text-to-speech, and word prediction on students who have experience difficulties with writing. An area that has not been represented in this research was using picture to text software with young students who have experienced frustration and teacher dissatisfaction with their writing products. Letter formation, spacing, spelling, word composition, and sentence construction seem to inhibit positive progress. These students have ideas which seem locked up in their brains.

This internship has helped me to find an area to research that could help students develop writing skills in the early years without ingraining constant association of failure with the writing process. Perhaps students who found success with picture to text software as second or third graders would be more eager to practice writing and therefore improve their skills.