The Write Stuff: Four Hybrid Classroom Tools for Middle School Writing

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LIBS 602: Production of Instructional Materials

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August 5, 2022

Proposal

Teaching writing is tough, but teaching it via Zoom during a pandemic is even harder! With the help of four free, easy-to-use online applications, secondary English/Language Arts teachers and information professionals can seamlessly navigate the hybrid learning environment, teaching writing to students online and in person.

Introduction

Hello everyone! My name is Keisha Scott, and I am a graduate student at Old Dominion University, pursuing my Masters of Library and Information Studies degree. Before pursuing school librarianship, I served as a middle school Language Arts teacher for 8 years.

The year 2020 brought with it lots of challenges. Schools and businesses were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we quickly had to adapt to conducting classes online. When we finally returned to school in person in 2021, we brought with us the tools we had gained in quarantine. So when illness struck our school or bad weather struck the area, we were able to conduct classes online, (my students refer to it as the death of the snow day). Hybrid learning is here to stay, and it is inevitable that at some point in the school year, you may have students in person, online, or both. This poses a bit of a challenge for Language Arts teachers and teacher librarians who are accustomed to teaching writing skills in person following the traditional writer's workshop model. These four tools I will introduce to you today will help you to seamlessly navigate the hybrid learning environment because these tools can be used in class, online, or both to teach writing skills. Since my expertise is in the Language Arts classroom, I have decided to present these tools through the lens of an ELA teacher; however, all of these tools can be used in any content area, and I encourage English teachers and school librarians in attendance to share these tools with your colleagues.

Powtoon - Introduction

Powtoon is an engaging workplace that lets you create, manage, and publish instructional videos. It features an easy-to-use video maker and editor, whiteboard doodling which comes in handy for drawing, custom characters and animations, screen recording, and exciting presentations (Powtoon, n.d.).

This tool can be used to compose an introductory video for students using the flipped learning model. In the flipped learning model, students view instructional videos and complete their notes before they come to class.That way, the majority of the class time can be spent practicing rather than listening to lectures and copying notes (American Library Association, 2014). Using Powtoon, you can create your own engaging videos for students to watch at home, on the bus ride to school, or even in the cafeteria in the morning during breakfast while socializing with friends.

In our school system, we follow the 30/30/30 instructional model in which 30 minutes are spent in word analysis and reading, 30 minutes are spent in grammar and writing, and 30 minutes are spent in targeted small group instruction and independent practice. Thirty minutes is a tight window to cover a composition lesson, especially when a portion of that 30 minutes is spent in grammar instruction. This often means we have to rush through the grammar portions of our lessons. When we are moved to an online session due to illness outbreaks in the school or inclement weather, that model is reduced to 20/20/20. Using Powtoon to cover 2-3 minute mini-lesson helps! It's engaging enough to hold the attention of your learners, and convenient enough to be added to your Google Classroom where you may have a folder for notes, references, tutorials, etc. That way students who are engaged in independent practice during small group instruction can revisit the video when they have questions. Likewise, asynchronous learners can rely on these instructional videos when diving into new concepts with limited access to the classroom teacher.

Let's say your grammar focus for the day is standard 8.8F - Students will use quotation marks with dialogue and direct quotations (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2017). Here is an example of a Powtoon video that can be used in the flipped learning model before class, during class to introduce the concept, and/or referred back to by students completing independent practice while classmates are engaged in small group instruction.

Some major drawbacks of the program are that to fully unlock all the features, you will need a paid membership, though I think it's worth it considering you can use the videos you create for future classes long after you cancel; and it will take some practice to get used to the editing tools, so this may not be the best tool to use for last minute lesson planning unless you are already an expert.

What questions do you have about Powtoon?

Google Arts & Culture - Exploration

It is not often that teachers get to take their students on field trips, but when students are learning online, it is impossible. That's where Google Arts & Culture steps in, a virtual field trip website ideal for hybrid teachers. This site lets you explore places all over the world including national parks, different countries, museums, and historical landmarks. This site also allows you to learn about historical figures and artists, events in history, movements in art, and mediums (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.).

Sometimes teaching writing composition can be difficult, not because students do not understand the concept of the writing process, but because students lack imagination. Google Arts & Culture helps with that! Let's say your focus for the day is standard 8.7e - the student will establish a central idea incorporating evidence, maintaining an organized structure and formal style (VDOE, 2017). The official Grade 8 Virginia SOL writing prompt you are practicing is this:

Where is one place in the world you would like to visit? Explain why you would want to visit this place, and what you would want to do or see once you arrive. Include specific details and examples in your response?

Using Google Arts & Culture, you can take the students on a virtual tour of a place you want to visit. In class, you can project the scene on the promethean board and lower the lights in the room so students can emerge themselves in the experience. On zoom, you can share your screen with distance learners. Also, in a flipped learning model you can post the virtual field trip link for students and encourage them to explore at their own pace and take notes of what they liked or disliked. However you decide to use it, it can be a great tool to help students visualize as you model the first step of the writing process.

Here is an example of one of the virtual field trips I took on Google Arts & Culture to the British Museum in London. (Share QR code and allow the audience a few minutes to browse).

Here is the three-pronged thesis statement I composed in response to the prompt: I would love to visit the British Museum in London because I love history, I want to explore the ancient Greek art exhibits, and I want to see Egyptian relics up close.

Some drawbacks of the website include limited viewing and uncomfortable angles. You simply can't see what has not been pre-recorded, so anything newly added to the sites are unavailable.

What questions do you have about Google Arts & Culture?

Canva Infographic - Planning

Anchor charts have been very instrumental tools to introduce and remind students of important skills and concepts. Teachers take large post-it paper, hand write notes in bright, beautiful colors and add hand drawn illustrations, while students mimic their own versions on paper (Moses & Lee, 2014). When they're done, the post-it is hung somewhere in the room where every student can see it to "anchor" them and the students' copies are saved in a binder or notebook for later. That works wonders in a traditional classroom setting, but it doesn't benefit distant learners.

Infographics are the new and improved anchor charts. Like anchor charts, infographics combine images and brief notes to convey a concept or skill. Because they can be created online, teachers can use Canva to make infographics ahead of class time and print them in poster form to anchor the class as well as print out individual copies for students to use as notes. Because they are electronic, they can also be posted to Google Classroom in a notes folder for students to refer back to. Most importantly, it saves so much instructional time! However, if having students create their own anchor chart is an important component of your lesson, then students can use Canva to create their own infographics as well.

Let's say your focus for the day is standard 8.7c - the Student will use prewriting strategies to generate and organize ideas (VDOE, 2017). Canva has plenty of infographics on the writing process to choose from. Pick one, use it as is, or edit it to your liking, and you may share it with students. This is ideal for online learners who may not have the privilege of referring back to large anchor charts in the classroom. Students who may be back and forth between classroom and online learning can rely on the same infographic shared in class being found in a reliable place in the Google classroom.

This can be used in a variety of other ways in class. For example, you can pair this with an instructional video by instructing students to view the video first and then design their own

notes in the form of an infographic. You can also have students conduct a brainstorm-prewriting activity using a preselected infographic template.

As for drawbacks, unfortunately some of my favorite templates can only be accessed through membership. Also, realistically, it isn't convenient to print large posters to hang in the classroom like anchor charts. However, when you consider that you gain multiple uses from digital and printed infographics, it's worth the price. Lastly, designing the infographic does take a little bit of practice whether you are editing a chart that already exists or starting from scratch.

What questions do you have about Canva Infographics?

Flip - Revision

Flip is an innovative workspace that allows teachers to set topics where students can respond via video. This creates a correspondence between teachers, students, and classmates where critical thinking and responding to higher order questions is no longer limited to what students and teachers can draft with paper and pencil. This is ideal for students who have incredible ideas, who can express their ideas aloud, but sometimes have trouble writing them on paper. The struggling reader can also benefit from Flip using the immersive reader tool that reads comments aloud to participants.

Here's a brief video on 10 ways you can use Flipgrid in the classroom. (start video at 1:30 seconds)

Let's say your focus for the day is standard 8.7l - the student will revise writing for clarity of content, word choice, sentence variety, and transitions among paragraphs (VDOE, 2017). Flip could be used in this case to challenge students to read their rough drafts aloud. This takes the pressure off of presenting to the class as some students are intimidated by public speaking and will flat out refuse. Students can re-record as many times as they like until they are satisfied with the results, and they have the option to record voice only. Once students have finished recording, they can give targeted feedback to one another as they listen for run-on sentences and fragments, sentence structure, word choice, sufficient elaboration, etc.

This is ideal for the hybrid classroom because distant learners will not always have access to physical copies of their classmate's work to edit in red ink. It adds another layer to Google docs draft submissions and feedback because struggling readers who attend class in person or online are not excluded because of their deficit. Furthermore, the writing process becomes a community initiative rather than just an exchange between students and teachers.

Some features of the program include moderation which will come in handy to prevent mischievous pranks, privacy breaches, and conflict, time limits for recordings, and the ability to

attach documents and images. A major drawback of the program is that it does not work well without buy in and student participation, so make it fun!

What questions do you have about Flip?

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