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A Professor Responds by Computer to the Writing of Elementary Students. ERIC Digest.

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During the Summer of 1990, I responded to the writing of 20 fourth through seventh

graders from a computer installed in my home in Bloomington, Indiana by the Bartholomew County (Indiana) Community School Corporation. Working daily with their classroom teacher in a summer school computer writing class that drew students from all over Columbus, Indiana, the students sent me 263 pieces of writing in 4 weeks. The experience is one that I will never forget, and one that I hope the young writers and their teacher, Vickie Osman, enjoyed.

The students wrote their drafts on Microsoft Works. Then their teacher attached their files to messages that she sent by modem to me with an electronic mail program called CCMail. Microsoft Works is essentially a user-friendly program that presented few problems to the upper elementary students as they wrote daily anything ranging from a 3-line haiku to 10 to 20 computer-screen stories. Only a few students seemed to have any difficulty composing on a computer. Occasionally, messages were scrambled or even lost because of faulty commands, but no one quit because of technical difficulties. At times, Mrs. Osman and I decided that we were experiencing more problems than the students, primarily because we were working with 20 times as many messages as each individual student. She had to make certain that all of the students' writing (sometimes as many as 40 a day) were attached to her CCMail message to me. I had to make certain that I responded daily to all messages sent by these students, who had just completed grades 3 through 6.

Of the 20 students enrolled in the class, 2 entered fourth grade the following fall; 9 entered fifth; 5 were eligible for sixth; 4 would be in seventh.

Asked on a questionnaire to report their average grade in English, 5 noted that they earned mostly A's; 7 received B's; 3 C's; 5 D's and F's.

MOTIVATION FOR ENROLLING

When asked why they enrolled in the course, 7 students replied that they liked to work with computers; 4 wanted to improve their writing skills; 2 signed up for a "fun class"; 6 enrolled because their mothers "made me" or "needed a baby sitter"; 1 student expressed concern about failing grades in English.
Five listed all or part of the English language arts as one of their favorite school subjects; 8 wrote that English was their least favorite subject.

Mrs. Osman took the students through the steps in the writing process. She and I suggested both topics and writing modes whenever appropriate--and especially when a student indicated a lack of something to write about.

The students, Mrs. Osman, and I introduced ourselves by computer. I talked to Mrs. Osman by telephone, but I did not meet her or the students until the next to last day of summer school, when I visited the class. I did this intentionally so that the students would be responding only to the messages that I sent by computer; they would not be

responding to vocal inflection, facial expressions, mannerisms, or clothing.

The students, Mrs. Osman, and I thought that the introductions helped to get the writing exchanges off to a good start; however, they did present some problems. Several of the students decided that I was a pen pal, and it took nearly 2 weeks before Mrs. Osman convinced them that I was not responding to their writing just to be friendly. Those students had apparently decided that my response to their themes, including suggestions for revision, were merely attempts on my part to keep the computer dialogue flowing.

The students wrote reports, poems, dialogues, stories, and letters. To give the students a variety of writing experiences, Mrs. Osman assigned some tasks. But the students were also free, throughout the summer-school session, to choose their own topic and modes.

RESPONSE TO DRAFTS

My task was to respond to the drafts that each student sent to me by way of the computer network. My objectives were to help students improve their drafts and to encourage them to write more effectively. I was conducting writing conferences by computer, but such conferences are far different from face-to-face exchanges. I could not rely on a smile, a soothing voice, an outstretched hand, or any other non-verbal cue. I had only words.
Typically, I made an encouraging comment to the student which I followed with a series of questions or comments that I thought would help the writer improve the work. More than half of the students incorporated some--if not all--of my suggestions in their revisions; others chose to ignore them until Mrs. Osman told the students that they must use my questions and comments as a checklist for revision. That some students chose to ignore my comments and questions was not surprising since several researchers have noted that student writers frequently ignore both teacher and peer suggestions for revisions.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT

After 4 weeks and 263 responses to the young writers, I feel that I can safely record the following observations:
1. The quality of the writing was impressive. More than half of the students wrote quite well, and of those who did, not all earn A's and B's in English. Several of the students who considered English to be their worst subject responded to my comments and suggestions far better than a few of the "A" students who thought their first drafts "were perfect."

2. I frequently wrote as much, if not more, than the student writer.

3. I did not limit my questions and comments to the content only. Since publication--in the broadest sense of that term--was the goal, I commented on, or asked questions about sentence structure, spelling, and mechanics. (The students knew that I would put samples of their writing together in a publication for students, their parents, and a few teachers. They also knew that I might use some of their writings in articles I would write for journals.) Students were free to use the spell checker on the computer, and I urged them to do so. But, as Mrs. Osman noted, the spell checker did not highlight some misspellings because it could not always determine which word a student was trying to spell.

4. If serious errors effectively blocked communication, I gave the writer a short, focused lesson on a specific topic, such as run-on sentences. I was pleased with the responses to those lessons by several of the students.

5. As I read and responded to more of each student's writing, I tried to make my comments and questions fit the student. In some instances, I limited my remarks solely to a few encouraging words. In other cases, I would volunteer short lessons on specific problems. In still others, I would suggest other types of writing or topics. And, of course, I learned that not all of my comments, suggestions, and questions were well received.

6. I rediscovered what I had learned years ago: I must not impose my will on the student writer. I can suggest; I can question; I can point out strengths and weaknesses; but, ultimately, what is done with the writing is the decision of the writer.

When I started this project, I believed that students at all levels of instruction might write more and write better when they can use a computer and when they have an interested audience in addition to the classroom teacher. I now have no doubts about that hypothesis.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT COMPUTERS AND WRITING IN

ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS, SEE THE FOLLOWING:
Bright, Twyla L. (1991). "Integrating Computers in the Language Arts Classroom." Paper presented at the Annual Indiana Fall Language Arts Conference, Bloomington, IN. [ED 326 884]

Coats, Kaye, et al. (1990). "Ideas from Teachers." Writing Notebook: Creative Word Processing in the Classroom, 7(4), 40-41. [EJ 408 372]

Cochran-Smith, Marilyn. (1991). "Word Processing and Writing in Elementary Classrooms: A Critical Review of Related Literature." Review of Educational Research, 6(1), 107-55. [EJ 425 124]

Franklin, Sharon, Ed. (1988). Making the Literature, Writing, Word Processing Connection: The Best of the Writing Notebook. Second Edition. Eugene, OR: Creative Word Processing. [ED 312 644]

Montague, Marjorie. (1990). "Computers and Writing Process Instruction." Computers in the Schools, 7(3), 5-20. [EJ 420 378]

O'Rourke, Ann and David Philips (1989). Responding Effectively to Pupils' Writing. Writing Research Report No. 2. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. [CS 213 090]

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