Reimagining Writing Instruction during Pandemic Times: A First Grade Teacher's Journey Creating a Digital Writing Workshop

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Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers to shift teaching and learning from face-to-face in brick-and-mortar classrooms to online learning platforms. For many teachers, this abrupt change was not an easy transition, particularly when working with students in early childhood who are reading and writing in the early years of literacy development. Yet, using digital tools during writing instruction was not an entirely new concept in education. This article describes a first grade teacher's journey teaching writing to culturally and linguistically diverse young writers through online instruction. Despite the challenges she faced in forging this new experience alone, her shift to online writing instruction demonstrates that a digital writing workshop is both possible and effective with young writers under some conditions. Implications from this study call for professional development that emphasizes process-oriented writing instruction in both face-to-face and online education across grade levels.

Keywords: Writing Workshop, Emergent Literacy, Elementary, Virtual

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In March 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers to switch teaching and learning from face-to-face classroom settings to online learning platforms. For many teachers, this abrupt change was not an easy transition, particularly when working with students in early childhood who are reading and writing at an early and emergent literacy level (Clay, 1991). Although using digital technology to facilitate writing instruction in secondary classrooms was already in place before the onset of the pandemic (Hicks, 2009), using digital tools in early elementary classrooms during writing instruction was more often used to enhance (Hower, 2016) rather than facilitate writing instruction. Nevertheless, teachers across the world found themselves teaching basic subjects, including writing and composition, to students of all ages from preschool children to adults through online learning platforms (Secoy & Sigler, 2019).

As literacy researchers who work with preservice and inservice teachers, we wanted to

know how teachers were making this transition to teaching writing online. This article describes one teacher's journey shifting her first grade classroom in a lower socioeconomic suburban school district to fully online instruction. We begin by discussing the context of digital writing instruction and effective writing workshop practices in elementary school. Then we present Sarah, who agreed to share her journey with us. She shared both successes and challenges that she experienced reimagining her writing workshop in a digital environment, including parents' expanded roles in her online classroom. Sarah's experience in implementing the writing workshop online revealed the juxtaposition of technology as a limiting, yet empowering tool for teaching young children.

The Digital Writing Workshop

In the wake of new understandings about reading and writing in the digital age, new definitions for literacy emerged, including new and multiple literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Internet-based technologies inspired teachers to incorporate technology into their teaching, particularly as Web 2.0 brought social networking to classroom literacy instruction across grade levels. At the secondary level, Hicks (2009) introduced the digital writing workshop which incorporates digital technology in a student-centered writing workshop approach. This framework encourages authentic and participatory writing experiences and includes choice, inquiry, conferring, author's craft, publishing, and assessment as pillars of the workshop approach.

Since then, elementary teachers with computers and Internet access in their classrooms have begun using digital tools and apps to enhance their writing instruction. For example, they may use digital apps and platforms, such as Haiku Deck (Haiku Deck, 2019), Buncee (Buncee, 2020), and Adobe Spark (Adobe, 2021), to encourage digital storytelling and Daisy the Dinosaur (Hopscotch Technologies, 2016) or

ScratchJr (Tufts University, 2014) to encourage multimodal compositions (Pytash et al., 2016). Technology-enhanced writing instruction has typically occurred in face-to-face, brick-and-mortar settings where access to computers in the classroom provides students with opportunities to publish their writing or to research their topics. However, according to the "Common Sense Census: Inside the 21st Century Classroom" (Vega & Robb, 2019), "Eight out of 10 U.S. K–12 teachers had either 1-to-1 access or shared computing devices in their classrooms (82 percent)" (p. 29). This suggests that nearly 20% of teachers did not have the technology necessary to teach writing or potentially any other subject in face-to-face classrooms. The onset of the pandemic amplified the digital divide as teachers were forced to teach all subjects through online learning platforms. In 2020, using technology to teach writing became an educational necessity (Downey, 2021).

When Hicks (2009) wrote *The Digital Writing Workshop*, the context for his book was face-to-face classroom instruction. The idea that a world health crisis would push reading and writing instruction to distance learning platforms was not anticipated. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced digital writing instruction to evolve more rapidly, this time with digital apps and learning management systems as the medium of instruction. For many teachers, this rapid transition to remote and online schooling has been challenging; yet, some teachers aimed to replicate effective writing pedagogy based on the theoretical foundations of a student-centered, process-oriented writing workshop (Nunnery et al., 2021) which includes choice about writing topics, deep dives into craft lessons, writing conferences, and publishing in the culture of a rich literacy learning community. In fact, the writing workshop approach has been a foundational practice for teaching writing across many elementary writing classrooms, including those with students in early childhood for more than 30 years (Calkins, 1986; 1994; 2008; Graves, 1983; 1994).

Beginning Writers and the Writing Workshop

A young writer's journey begins when ideas are random marks or scribbles on a page (Ray & Glover, 2008). In school, these beginning writers become more aware of the purposes for writing, and through their teacher's influence they learn that they are in fact writers. Over time, they become skilled in both the writing process and writing conventions. Describing writing instruction and development, Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) propose that "writing is not just one skill, but a bundle of skills that includes sequencing, spelling, rereading, and supporting big ideas with examples" (p.1). In the writing workshop, young children learn to write about ordinary things, including their everyday lives (Graves, 1994) and exceptional moments. They learn to capture their ideas to make them both visible and permanent through drawing and writing, while cultivating an understanding of story. They learn how to organize and develop information gathered from personal experiences and learned facts. Working in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), children write "under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). For example, in the classroom, teachers model the writing process by writing in front of their students, demonstrating what it means to be a writer. Acting as guides, these teachers show children ways to transform their thinking into visual representations that others can listen to and read (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

In a writing workshop, teachers typically begin writing instruction with a mini-lesson to teach tools and strategies young writers can use in their writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). Students are taught the stages of the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) while simultaneously learning to transform ideas and experiences into stories about themselves and other meaningful parts of their world. In the prewriting stage, beginning writers often plan their ideas by thinking aloud. Donald Graves (1983) refers to this process as rehearsal, as students explain their thinking aloud to an adult or a partner. Additionally, in order to develop their assigned or self-selected topics, teachers model brainstorming techniques for adding details to their stories. They teach students to use webbing, sketching, and listing to organize their ideas and make their thinking visible (Spandel, 2013). Teachers usher young writers through a process that is both sequential and recursive as they move from prewriting to drafting, through revising and editing, and toward publishing their unique masterpieces.

Under the watchful eye of their teacher, beginning writers create books and other developmentally appropriate and functional forms of writing before tackling traditional academic writing, such as essays and reports (Ray & Glover, 2008). They write letters to Santa, create menus, invitations, or recipes as well as create books about their personal experiences, imaginary characters, and topics of interest. Teachers monitor their development in small group and individual writing conferences.

During the writing workshop, teachers use conversation in the context of literature and authentic writing experiences to teach writing skills and model what it means to be a writer (Ray & Glover, 2008). They discuss literature, writing, and the work that writers do in small groups, orienting children to think and talk like members of the literacy club (Ray & Glover, 2008; Smith, 1988). In small group and individual writing conferences, teachers tailor suggestions about students' writing around their unique strengths and needs (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) to support them in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and to move them toward becoming independent and proficient writers.

The writing workshop ends with a time for sharing to celebrate the writers and showcase

their work. As these beginning authors grow within the context of writing in school and mature in age and skill, they learn to tell and compose more sophisticated stories. They learn how to present their messages in more conventional and more advanced ways. The writing workshop environment may vary slightly from classroom to classroom, but the essential aim of strategically scaffolding students' movement through the writing process is often the same. When integrating technology into the writing workshop, teachers use it to support writing instruction in a variety of ways (Lacina, 2003).

Technology and Traditional Writing Workshop with Beginning Writers

In the early grades, students often use technology as a tool to enhance their writing at various stages of the writing process and to produce writing in more creative formats (Hower, 2016). Students use technology to research and to represent their ideas with digital images and videos that support their thinking. Teachers also use technology to provide students with feedback using the comment capabilities within shared applications, such as Google Docs (Google, 2021) or Seesaw (Seesaw, 2021). Using technology with learners is not uncommon in districts equipped with computers in the classroom (Braverman, 2016); however, at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, many teachers were ill-equipped to transition from using technology as an enhancement tool to using it as the medium for delivering instruction (Schwartz, 2020). For many teachers already grappling with ways to use technology effectively in the face-to-face classroom, finding engaging ways to reach young learners in cyberspace (Schwartz, 2020; 2021) pushed them to become creative and resourceful. Some teachers, like the teacher in our study, even found themselves learning new strategies and tools to teach writing.

The Shift

With the abrupt transition to online literacy instruction, classroom walls suddenly changed, giving way to cyber walls across grade levels. As literacy researchers, we were curious about how teachers taught writing through distance learning. We wanted to know how teachers engaged students in the writing process remotely during the crisis of COVID-19. In addition, we wanted to know how teachers implemented the writing workshop with young writers in an online environment. We were also interested in finding ways to support teachers in their work to teach beginning writers online.

In October 2020, in our quest to understand and support elementary educators, we met Sarah, a first grade teacher who elected to teach online when no other first grade teachers at her school volunteered. As a teacher with six years of experience teaching fifth and first grades, Sarah accepted this challenge. She explained that she liked technology and wasn't afraid to try new things but felt somewhat alone in this journey to teach first grade completely online.

Sarah's online classroom of 25 students was similar to her previous face-to-face classroom where she maintained a routine in which all subjects were scheduled at specific times. During the six hour school-day, her self-contained online class met live through Google Meet (Google, 2017), a video-conferencing app, for whole group, small group, and individual instruction. Although Sarah's students had access to several digital tools at home that they learned to use with relative ease, including a camera and microphone, she required parents or guardians to be available to troubleshoot technology glitches.

Our conversation with Sarah provided insight into the ways teachers of young children are implementing writing instruction online. While Sarah's teaching practices may or may not reflect the practices of colleagues placed in a similar situation, Sarah's experience reminds us

of the thoughtful and intentional decisions that many teachers are making in an effort to create effective online literacy environments. As we listened to her describe her new instructional reality, we reimagined the writing workshop online as both possible and empowering despite certain limitations.

Reimagining the Writing Workshop in a Digital Environment

Sarah applied her prior knowledge about using a writing workshop approach in the face-to-face classroom to influence the type of writing environment she sought to create for her online setting. She told us that "It's different; however, we try to keep it very similar to my face-to-face classroom." She included whole group mini-lessons, small group guided instruction, and writing conferences to develop young writers through the stages of the writing process, including prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

She began the school year similarly to her colleagues who were teaching in face-to-face classrooms by orienting students to the new writing environment. However, while her colleagues assigned students in-class writing folders to store their drafts, and taught them where to find the papers, pencils, and other tools needed for independence during the classroom workshop, Sarah supported her students' independence by teaching them to use digital tools such as the camera feature and other illustration tools embedded in the Seesaw (2021) digital platform. At the beginning of the school year, Sarah taught her students how to take pictures of their work. She found that "It was very easy for first graders to just click on that camera and take a picture of a paper." After taking pictures of their stories that they created on paper, they uploaded them into the learning management system and received her oral feedback.

Sarah set aside specific time in her schedule to focus on providing students with feedback on their writing. She explained that in her face-to-face classroom, "I can just do these conferences, while I'm walking around and I'm looking at the writing." However, in an online classroom, she would have to find larger chunks of time to conference with students. She said, "Here we have to make a whole day of it," because "timing is an issue and then not being able to see the students to provide immediate feedback, right, then and there; that's an issue."

Additionally, Sarah worked with students on their writing goals during individual writing conferences while the rest of the class worked on other assignments online at home, but still under Sarah's watchful gaze. When we asked her how she managed to conduct individual writing conferences while also supervising the whole class online, she explained the need for flexibility: "I don't do all the students all the time." Sometimes she conferred with students in small skill groups instead of individually. She added, "If I feel like five students are on punctuation, and they are not doing punctuation, then I would pull five of them, and I would meet with them, or I will just do it during guided reading time."

Effective management of any writing workshop, whether it is in a face-to-face classroom or an online environment, requires routine (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). We wondered what a writing workshop routine looked like in Sarah's online classroom and how she managed to engage first graders' attention online for an entire school day. She replied, "Oh, well, they have a schedule. So we have whole group meetings and then we have small group meetings." During the whole group meeting, Sara taught and demonstrated a skill using a digital whiteboard feature in Seesaw. Although writing workshop teachers already balance routine and flexibility, Sarah found that shifting her writing workshop online forced her to make more spontaneous decisions than normal so that she could meet the

needs of her students. She explained, "Just right now I'm doing whatever I feel like, whoever needs it." In both settings, she would hold writing conferences while students worked independently following a whole group skills lesson. She described the routine:

> In whole group, I would do a hook, model a little bit of guided [instruction], and then in small group I do the whole guided practice and their independent practice. Then they go to these journals and they work on them and submit them for assessment.

Because Sarah required her students to be visible on camera, she was able to monitor their independent activities while she worked with small groups of students. Instead of rotating through learning centers organized around the classroom, students would complete their independent writing and activities in subject specific digital journals found within the Seesaw platform.

Brainstorming

When we asked her how she facilitated the writing process online with emerging writers, she replied, "Now the students who I know are emerging writers or are unable to write at all, they create picture books on Book Creator." Sarah offered an example of how she facilitated brainstorming: "They come up with the topic and make a heart map or something to come up with various topics." Much like what happens in a face-to-face classroom, Sarah modeled brainstorming ideas for writing in front of the whole class and during writing conferences. She told us how she brainstormed with students when writing a "How To" piece:

> This week we did "How To"- explanatory text where they came up with what they knew how to teach. They came up with a bunch of topics. I talked to them about it. I conferenced with them. We discussed the topics, then they created the illustrations.

They did all of this on paper and took a picture on Seesaw.

Drafting and Conferring

Students in Sarah's first grade classroom were in various stages of writing development. Some students told stories by drawing, others were beginning to shape letters, and some were able to write complete words and sentences. As she did in a face-to-face context, when teaching online she also guided students through the drafting process by conferring with them one-on-one. She explained that the process of helping students communicate their stories in their first drafts online was much like what she would have done in her face-to-face classroom, with the exception of taking pictures to submit assignments. Sarah recounted, "Then they go on to writing the draft. They do the same thing, writing on paper, taking a picture, sending it in. Then I offer them some suggestions."

Sarah offered suggestions through oral feedback that she recorded for students to listen to during independent work time. She stated, "I can write comments and I can even record myself, giving them a comment on audio, so they can listen to the comments and know what to fix, what I like, and what they need to work on."

Editing and Revising

Sarah taught her students to revise and edit their writing during mini-lessons and in small group conferences which focused on letter formation, spelling, and conventions. She recognized that younger students working online needed to revise by using traditional paper and pencil methods rather than by typing or using a digital trackpad. She shared this example:

> I asked them to use color markers, crayons, just the way we do in the classroom. It's to just kind of show where they edited, what they did, how they revised; what they added. They use those paper strips. They staple

them together to show where they added a new sentence, take a picture on the Internet and then they type that on Book Creator.

Sarah recognized that many of her students were still developing fine motor skills, learning the alphabet, and basic sight words. Therefore, she also asked her students to use pencils and crayons to form letters and compose grammatical approximations, which she described as follows: "We're working on punctuation and uppercase letters right now. And depending on the writing, that's how I teach them." Thus, Sarah led her students through the editing and revising process according to their individual academic needs. She found teaching emergent writing skills online with digital tools challenging; therefore, she had to innovate. "We have to make everything ourselves and we need time," she explained when referring to the individual journals she created for students to use in SeeSaw. Although she knew that resources exist online, she didn't have enough time to research and develop them herself which is why she used traditional paper and pencil methods to teach editing and revising.

Essentially, Sarah blended technologies to teach editing and revising. She taught her students what it means to edit and revise by using the tactile tools offered by movable paper strips to move and add sentences in their writing. She could assess their process through the pictures her students submitted of their work, and then offered them the opportunity to publish their revised work digitally.

Publishing and Sharing

After conferring with students about their writing, Sarah helped her students navigate websites and other digital resources to publish their work. In particular, she used Book Creator (Tools for Schools, 2020), a social platform that stores student creations in a library and facilitates an online version of the author's chair (Graves & Hansen, 1983). Sarah pointed to a

Seesaw (2021) screen on her computer to show us where her students posted their final products, explaining that "They can do a lot of things. They can make comic books. They can add images there. They can make a nice book and then everyone in the classroom and whoever I've shared the library with can read those books." Then she described her Friday routine for celebrating her students across all stages of the writing process:

On Fridays I have author's chair where I select random students and display their books on the screen where they read their books. Classmates offer their comments and feedback. Now the students who I know are emerging writers or [who] are unable to write at all create picture books on Book Creator. They just add pictures so that they're included as well.

Sarah used Class Dojo (Class Dojo, 2011) to randomly call on students to take turns reading their books aloud as if they were sitting in a traditional author's chair. The online peers were able to unmute themselves to provide oral feedback to the young author's digital creation. These weekly writing celebrations helped Sarah build the important aspect of community found in her class's "literacy club" (Ray & Glover, 2008; Smith, 1988). She wanted her students to be able to celebrate each other's accomplishments and demonstrate the respect endemic to a writing workshop which promotes sharing written and visual products in front of an audience and receiving peer feedback. Sarah had modeled this process during mini-lessons. She explained that "I have shown them books which are pictures. I talked about books that are out there, that authors write with just pictures, so that way they [students] feel included when they tell their story."

Both Sarah and her students overcame several challenges in this new environment. She blended technologies using traditional paper and pencil methods with digital tools to teach the writing

process, all the while recognizing the importance of teaching basic skills. To this end, parents became integral members of her classroom community, which she found beneficial yet sometimes challenging.

Developing Parent Partnerships: Balancing a Delicate Relationship

Sarah realized that parents were integral to student success in her classroom; yet sometimes their presence alongside students required delicate handling of parental involvement related to student privacy and reliable assessments. Still, Sarah needed parents to be on hand to manage potential technology issues.

Before beginning instruction, Sarah needed to make sure that parents understood the implications of having an online student who is just in first grade and still learning basic technology and literacy skills. In our interview, she explained, "So we have to really educate parents. That's what I did for the first two or three weeks of school." First grade students need assistance with basic computer skills such as powering on the computer, navigating to the correct site, creating timers for class times, as well as noting schedules for their special co-curricular classes. Additionally, Sarah had to anticipate technology problems her young students might encounter and not know how to resolve by themselves. For example, "What if the Internet's not working or they can't restart computers? They can't troubleshoot that kind of stuff." Therefore the beginning-of-the-year training for parents offered a step-by-step understanding of what the school day entails and where students might need the most support. She also had the adult family members sign a written agreement acknowledging their responsibility to be available at home to provide technology support for their students during the school day. Although she was often able to resolve technology problems directly with students, she said, "I have taught my students to go get their parents in case I need them."

Parental support influenced writing in the online classroom in both positive and negative ways. Sarah mentioned that it was helpful for parents to see how their students were doing independently and where they needed the most assistance. According to Vygotsky (1978), students perform better when they work in their zone of proximal development which usually requires the guidance of someone more capable to guide them during the learning process. In a face-to-face classroom, teachers often call students to the teacher's table to work with them directly and to assess their progress informally. To facilitate this online, Sarah was able to call the names of specific students to work with, while the rest of the class worked independently but still under her supervision. She found it easier to keep her young learners in one large room, rather than to move them into smaller breakout groups, so that she could monitor them working and call their names when she required their attention, just as she would in a face-to-face classroom. Essentially, her students became adept at knowing when to tune in to the teacher, and when to focus on their independent work.

The first grade students sometimes needed help at home to navigate the technology when problems arose. Therefore, Sarah depended on parental support to help resolve technology glitches in the event she could not. Parents adopted many roles in the online environment, including the roles of caregiver, tech help, mentor, and teacher at times. Indeed, parental assistance with technology was warranted; however, parental assistance with writing was seen as an obstacle to assessing a student's true writing ability. In our interview, Sarah described a situation where a parent provided too much support. She explained that it was obvious that the student's submitted writing was different from what she had previously produced, resulting in "an assessment that may not be reliable." During the interview, Sarah would refer to students who "can't write." Seeking clarification, we asked her to explain what she

meant. She replied, "Well, there's scribbles, but then that's the thing. I don't get those scribbles unless I'm in the small group...that's one issue with assessment because the parents would help the student." Sarah described the different styles of handwriting she had noticed on the student's spelling test which raised doubts about her true writing ability. Sarah confirmed this inconsistency later when working with the student in a small group. Sarah described the situation in this way:

> When I finally had her in a small group, all by herself, I asked her to write some words and she just scribbled on the paper and put it in front of the camera. I had a feeling she couldn't write. ...[T]he parents are probably making her copy.

Privacy concerns also surfaced as parents were able to observe Sarah teach and interact with students. They noticed when students responded or didn't respond. She described two of her concerns: "I don't really like other parents looking at a student who cannot answer questions and sometimes the parents ask a lot of questions and that interrupts learning." Therefore Sarah realized that she must find ways to minimize parental involvement in order to protect her students' privacy. Our interview with Sarah revealed the need to balance useful intervention and unwarranted interference from parents.

Experiencing the Juxtaposition of Technology: Limiting, Yet Empowering

Shifting her classroom to an online environment offered Sarah other affordances and limitations as well. Time constraints seemed persistent. She often wished for more time to work with students and find resources to more effectively work with students, stating that "The most important thing that we need right now is time - so, resources and time." Teaching online seems to take more time and energy than she might have expended to prepare for face-to-face

teaching. For example, checking-in or conferences take much longer online than in a face-to-face setting, requiring students to be strategically scheduled throughout the day. Nevertheless, digital tools give students more opportunities to be creative. Proudly showcasing her students' digital books, Sarah explained, "So she made this book. I think she's still working on it; so they can add a lot of graphics and things. They can make their cover." In the absence of paper, markers, and crayons, creative digital tools for publishing are required in Sarah's online classroom, whereas they may have been optional in the face-to-face classroom. She explained that "Now the students who I know are emerging writers or [who] are unable to write at all, they create picture books on Book Creator." Thus, students with writing challenges feel a part of the writing community because they are able to incorporate pictures to tell their stories. Digital tools support writers who are still developing the skills and strategies needed to produce text independently (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

Self-Learning: Building a New Knowledge and Skill Set

Sarah's interview revealed a lack of district support and understanding of the complexity of her role as an online first grade teacher. She described many hours of self-learning in her journey to replicate and adapt what she knew to be useful and effective practices from her face-to-face classroom. For example, she created digital learning journals for each of her students, complete with subject-level tabs. Her district provides limited training for using many of these tools, so it was up to her to research ways to best serve her students. Because there was only one online teacher per grade level at her school, she did not have the benefit of collaborating with other team members who teach the same material. Like many teachers, Sarah entered a solo journey with little formal training but an abundance of determination.

Now What?

Thirteen years since Troy Hicks (2009) launched writing teachers on a path of digital writing instruction, writing teachers across grade levels have found technology to be an integral element of their teaching. Although teachers in the elementary grades may have begun using technology apps in additive ways to enhance writing (Hower, 2016) rather than as an integral parts of the writing process, Sarah's online classroom demonstrates the potential for using technology as a means (the writing process) to an end, rather than as the means to completing stages of writing. Sarah's prior experience teaching writing in a workshop approach and her affinity for technology allowed her to shift her writing workshop from a face-to-face classroom to an online setting. Although her journey has not been easy, she showed us that teaching writing online is possible. She ushered her students through the stages of the writing process, including brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. She remained more flexible, spontaneous, and creative than she may have anticipated, suggesting that teaching online may be more time-consuming than face-to-face teaching. Although her school district recommended using certain technology apps and platforms, she spent endless hours finding effective ways to implement them, discovering new tools to meet her students' needs, and training parents on technology and classroom expectations. Historical trends in educational technology suggest that digital technology will continue evolving (Howard & Mozejko, 2015), and the threat of the current surge in the Delta variant of the coronavirus tells us that the pandemic is not yet over (Medical Xpress, 2021). Although the need for schools to resume face-to-face teaching is great (Meckler et al., 2021), the fact that teachers have been able to conduct school online shows us that virtual learning is possible, albeit not ideal for all students (Povich, 2020).

Process Matters

Sarah's experience shifting her first grade writing workshop online shows us that the important thing about teaching writing is the process. Digital tools and apps may facilitate teaching the stages of the writing process. For example, a digital camera and microphone allow two-way communication between teachers and students in both synchronous and asynchronous time. Mini-lessons (i.e., brainstorming, revising, and editing) can be modeled in whole group sessions and reinforced in small group student-teacher conferences while other students work independently on assignments. Students then publish their work using digital tools. However, the essence of effective writing instruction is the ability to usher students through the critical thinking students need to work reflexively (Giles, 2010) through the stages of writing and composition. To this end, community and collaboration are crucial. Sarah collaborated with parents to make her online classroom viable. The strength of the writing workshop approach is that it encourages authentic and participatory writing experiences, including choice, inquiry, conferring, and deep content learning into the author's craft (Robertson et al., 2016). Because writing is complex, explicit attention to the writing process matters (Graves, 1983; Graves 1994). Digital tools may be useful for teaching students to apply the stages of the writing process to accomplish a goal and to document products created along the way; however, it is important to remember Donald Murray's (1972) timeless advice about writing instruction: "we are not teaching a product, we are teaching a process" (p. 1).

Virtual Academies and Professional Development

Today, students across grade levels compose text, revise, edit, and publish using classroom technology devices, including computers and tablets. Now that COVID-19 has pushed teachers and students of all ages online, we know that students, even first graders, can learn

to read and write through distance learning. Sarah's experience shows us that writing with digital tools has evolved from being an optional add-on in an early childhood writing workshop to becoming the necessary medium of instruction regardless of age or ability. Given the uncertain future of the pandemic, many school districts are opening virtual learning academies to accommodate students who cannot attend school in person (Paykamian, 2021), and we predict that many teachers will now incorporate more technology they may have learned to use during the pandemic into their teaching when they return to face-to-face classrooms (St. George et al., 2021). This has implications for professional development that should focus on the explicit teaching of strategies that train teachers to work within the parameters of evolving technology without losing sight of the literacy process involved in learning how to read and write.

To this end, Sarah's experience represents the beginning of the journey. In our continuing research, we plan to revisit with her as well as to hear the stories of other online writing teachers to learn more about their evolving experiences, including the achievements of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Social networks are abuzz with rhetoric about closing learning gaps for students, especially students of color, who have fallen behind from inconsistent learning experiences due to distance learning (Reilly, 2020). How can we help teachers adopt the attitude of moving forward instead of remediating potential learning losses from this past year of COVID-19 influenced writing instruction?

Lessons Learned: Move Forward; Don't Look Back

Sarah's experience has taught us that young children can indeed learn to write through online instruction. Regardless of the classroom structure, teachers must work with children in their zone of proximal development (Vygostky, 1978). For teachers who are returning to their traditional classroom settings, we urge them to look ahead and not backward. We know that writing is a developmental process for learners across grade levels. We challenge teachers to embrace the stories these young writers have to tell from learning in quarantine behind a computer screen. Although we have heard about children who never logged into their school platforms during the pandemic (Thomas, 2021), we anticipate that children working from home during the pandemic amassed other relevant lessons and stories to tell. Rather than focusing on potential learning loss (Goldstein, 2021; St. George et al., 2021), teachers should meet students returning to school from the pandemic with empathy and seek opportunities to move students forward from their lived experiences. We encourage teachers to tap into those experiences.

Maybe the pandemic has accelerated education which is often slow to shift paradigms in step with societal changes (Masters, 2020). Sarah's experience shows us that teaching young learners online is both possible and effective for students with support at home. Sarah also suggested that online learning may be better suited to students who require flexible learning environments, including the space to move around while working. Yet, not all students have the luxury of an attending adult to supervise and assist as needed during the school day. Thus, access to technology, professional development, and equity remain foreboding issues regardless of where school takes place.

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