

Engaging students in writing: online blogs versus conventional paper – insights and considerations

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This research paper explores the difference between conventional composition writing and writing of composition on online blogs by 224, 6 classes of Grade 5 students in an elementary-level future school in Singapore. Students in this study are savvy information communication technology (ICT) users who have been exposed to one-to-one computing since Grade 1. A total of 4 written assignments were given to the students – two conventional paper and pencil and two online blogs written assignments. No significant difference was found in students' scores on the four written assignments and their penmanship. The submission rate for the conventional paper and pencil composition written assignments was 93.75% as compared to 75% for the online blogs entries. Although interviews with teachers seem to suggest that the ICT mode could facilitate the learning of higher-order type of learning, the significantly lower submission rate for the online blogs is of concern and interest.

Keywords: English writing, blogs, one-to-one computing

Background

This research study is situated in one of the three elementary-level future school in Singapore. The school adopts a one-to-one computing learning environment for its students from Grade 1. School supplies the computing devices for Grade 1 to 3 and students procure and have their own computing devices from Grade 4 onwards. The school's mission is to nurture and inspire its students to the best of their potential through innovative approaches in an engaging environment, leveraging on technologies and research.

Purpose

The main purpose of this research study is to look into the quality of students' writing in conventional paper and pencil mode and online medium. This study also looks into the quality of students' handwriting to ascertain whether students' penmanship would be significantly altered after prolong exposure and usage of computing devices.

The study resulted from a series of professional discussions based on simple anecdotal observations by the English Language teachers of the classes concerned that their pupils were writing freely, without inhibitions, and with greater pride when using their class blogs. The team of teachers decided to investigate if these observations were valid and could be supported by data. A working team comprising the head of information communication technology (ICT) and research, one of the ICT champions in the English department and the Primary 5 English language teachers was formed to discuss and conceptualise the plan for a study on pupils' writing habits, both on paper and the online blogs. It was decided that the team would ride on the expository text types that pupils had already been exposed to in Term 1 of 2012 and four journal topics would be explored. The ICT champion put together a simple work plan, which included the time line for the various assignments and some resources to trigger the class discussions for the topics identified. The English Language teachers then discussed the implementation plan before embarking on the project. The entire process lasted about 10 weeks; about 2 weeks for the initial discussion and conceptualisation, about 4 weeks for the implementation of the assignments and about 4 weeks for the evaluation and data processing.

Literature Review

Blogs are online personal journals which allow regular updating to take place. They share a common theme and content can be posted by one or more authors. Readers are given the choice to comment on the posts, promoting

exchange of ideas between users. Besides its convenience and usage as open source, the outreach of blogs extends beyond physical interactions and provides opportunities to publish immediately. They are especially useful in language classes (Campbell, 2004; Grewling, 2004). Blogs can potentially bring, such as skills of communicating, sharing, analysing, reflecting and writing. Many other research studies have reported positive and encouraging findings on blogs and language learning (Boiling, 2008; Holliway & McCutchen, 2004; Izquierdo & Reyes, 2009; Merchant, 2005; Torrance, 2007).

Context

The whole cohort of 224 Grade 5 students from 6 classes took part in this research study. The classes were streamed according to their general academic abilities with the students' Grade 4 end-of-year assessments, inclusive of English, mathematics, science and their mother tongue language (i.e., Chinese, Malay and Tamil). 5-1 having students from the highest academic abilities and 5-6, the least. These 6 classes were taught by 4 different English language teachers.

The students were all given four written assignments with similar genre (i.e., argumentative type), two conventional paper and pencil ones and two that required them to write on blogs provided by the school. Each assignment was introduced through a simple class discussion of the topic which allowed the pupils to understand the various issues and implications of the subject matter. Pupils explored topics such as should smoking be totally banned, is it our responsibility to protect marine life, will our Mother Tongue languages (i.e., Chinese, Malay and Tamil) eventually die and if schools were the only places to learn. These topics were selected as they provided the context for the pupils to practise expository writing skills, a skill that they have been working on from the beginning of the term through their main English language curriculum, and were age-appropriate for the pupils. Choice of topics for the pen and paper assignments and the online blog assignments were random selections by the teachers. The topics on smoking and learning in schools were done on paper whereas those on marine life and mother tongue languages were done online. After the class based discussions, pupils were tasked to write their views either on paper or on the class blog. Each written assignment had to be completed within 30 minutes. Pupils could do any appropriate research or planning required, to organise and present their views, with supporting evidence, within the 30 minutes allocated for the task. The assignments were then graded by the teacher who taught the class according to a set of rubrics designed by the teachers. The rubrics included 3 main descriptor classifications-the issues, facts and content – with 5 marks for each category and a total of 15 marks.

This cohort of students had outperformed their counterparts in the country according to the University of New South Wales ICT skills assessment in both 2011 and 2012 and the differences were found to be statistically significant with the following statistics respectively: $t(213) = 5.024, p < 0.05$ and $t(216) = 2.301, p < 0.05$.

Preliminary Findings

Students' performance for the written assignments

The mean scores of the four writing assignments are presented in Table 1. Mean score for writing assignment 1 and 4 were done in conventional paper and pencil mode and the respective mean scores were 7.510 and 7.406. For writing assignments 2 and 3, they were done via blog postings and the mean scores were 7.224 and 7.748, respectively (see Table 1 for details).

A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the 143 Grade 5 students who had submitted all four of their writing or journal assignments. $F_{\max} = 1.542$, demonstrating homogeneity of variance and Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was not violated, Mauchly's $W = 0.983, p = 0.798$. The ANOVA results show that the students' scores differed among the four written assignments – two paper-based and two online blog-based, $F(3, 426) = 3.296, p = 0.020$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.023$. Pairwise comparison revealed that students' scores for writing assignment 2 – online blog-based ($M = 7.224, SD = 2.749$) differed significantly from assignment 3 – online blog-based ($M = 7.748, SD = 2.896$). No other statistical significant differences were found with the other writing assignments. The paper-based and online blog-based assignments students' scores did not differ significantly.

Submission rate of the assignments

Of the 224 students, 143 of them submitted all the four assignments, with 81 who had not submitted at least one of the assignments. For the conventional paper and pencil assignments 1 and 4, a total of 20 students did not submit their writing assignment 1 and nine did not submit assignment 4. In comparison, for the online blog writing assignments, 66 students did not submit assignment 2 and 46 students did not submit assignment 4. Table 2 shows the details of students who did not submit their writing assignments according to class and teacher. The chi-square statistics of $\chi^2(3, N = 141) = 56.248, p = 0.00$. As an index of effect size, Cohen's w was 0.632, which can be considered as large; suggesting that the non-submission rates amongst the four assignments vary significantly.

Conclusion

This research study aims to explore the quality of writing assignments via the conventional paper and pencil and online blogging modes. Although no significant difference was found in the quality between the conventional and online modes in the students' writing assignments, the study reveals an interesting phenomenon that is associated with online teaching and learning – lower assignment submission rates as compared to the conventional ones. In the follow up to this study, a more in-depth analysis of the interviews with the teachers and interviews with students from the various classes could reveal deeper insights into this phenomenon.

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Please cite as: Nair, S.S., & Tay, L.Y. (2012). Engaging students in writing: online blogs versus conventional paper – insights and considerations. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.), *Future challenges, sustainable futures. Proceedings ascilite Wellington 2012*. (pp.700-702).

<https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2012.1680>

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