

William Kist, Kelly Doyle, Jody Hayes, Jeff Horwitz, and J. T. Kuzior

Web 2.0 in the Elementary Classroom: Portraits of Possibilities

William Kist

*Associate Professor
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio*

It is “settling time”—first thing in the morning in Paula Bailey’s first-grade classroom as Kenny Loggins’s “House at Pooh Corner” plays in the background. Students are doing various activities around the room. Two boys are looking at a newspaper ad that is taped on the board. The ad is for a photo studio and features one of their classmates. They are quite engaged in reading it. Three computers are being used. One girl is working at her desk, tracing a snowflake stencil. Three girls are reading a book together. One girl is drawing a picture. Several students are working individually on other things; others are working collaboratively.

Soon, the focus moves to the centerpiece of the morning—“carpet time”—which includes the “Morning Message” and a fast-paced series of songs, dances, chants, and stories all loosely tied to a big book that Paula displays on a small easel. When attention turns to a big calendar on the wall, discussion shifts to the days of the week, numbers, and the weather. Paula and her students work quickly and with lots of laughter.

Midmorning, the class moves to the part of the day called “Workshop,” in which students will work on some “have-to” activities and some “choice” activities. These varied activities include a balance of writing, drawing, “phonics” and spelling activities, and reading from Paula’s large classroom library. During workshop time, Paula meets with reading “clubs” to read and discuss leveled books.

Paula’s classroom is in a building that was built in the early part of the twentieth century, standing at a very old crossroads out in the country. With her room in a sunken area of the building, the windows are small and up high in the walls. There are 24 students in the class, with

desks arranged in four groupings of approximately 6 desks each. One corner of the room is taken up with an area for the children to hang their coats. Another corner of the room includes a closet. A third corner has three computers. The room is crammed with all sorts of personal items of interest from Mrs. Bailey’s career of teaching. There are stuffed animals and pictures of Paula’s family and of her current and former students. One instantly feels at home.

My first day at Gardenview, observing Paula and her class, I made the following observation: “In the first 30 minutes of the morning, I’ve seen: dancing; photography; singing; drawing; reading; writing; technology; rap; listening to music; and conversation. I’ve seen: creation of a new song (ad lib); creation of a new drawing; listening. I’m amazed by the amount of singing and how they all know the lyrics.” At other times, I witnessed the use of other forms of communication and learning, such as graphic organizers, sign language, and drama. From the very first moments of the day, there was a seemingly effortless gliding between forms of representation

These notes at “Gardenview” in “Paula Bailey’s” class (the names have been changed) were made in the fall of 1998. I was just beginning to collect examples of teachers’ instructional uses of new literacies, and Mrs. Bailey’s classroom had been recommended to me as a rich resource for seeing new literacies in action. I think I realized even then that, while early childhood educators may not be, on the whole, the first to embrace technology in schools, ironically, one could make the argument that early childhood classrooms have historically, in comparison with classrooms in upper grades, actually been quite multimodal.

Certainly the general public has a conception of young children as being much more “computer savvy” than older generations, with the impression that even toddlers seem to be proficient at the

keyboard and interacting online. And certainly from the beginning there have been scholars who have looked at how young children interact with new media (Dyson, 2003; Kress, 1997) as well as those who have posited that learning to read needs to be broader than just learning to decode (Gee, 2000). Luke (2000) reported that Australian schools led the way as far back as the 1990s, using new media with emergent readers by widely implementing the Freebody and Luke (1990) model, which included the following four sets of “social practices requisite for critical literacy”:

- Developing resources as a code breaker
- Developing resources as a text participant
- Developing resources as a text user
- Developing resources as text analyst and critic

Recently, there have been reports of teachers using picturebooks (Hassett & Curwood, 2009), video (Lotherington & Chow, 2006), word processing (Van Leeuwen & Gabriel, 2007), visual art (Williams, 2007), and film (Fingeret, 2008); there has also been continued documentation of how young children interact with media texts (Wohlwend, 2009), all in an effort to see how these new media can be and are a part of young children’s lives.

My collaborators on this article, classroom teachers Kelly Doyle, Jody Hayes, Jeff Horwitz and, J. T. Kuzior (as well as the other writers in this issue of *Language Arts*), are taking these efforts in a brave new direction. Embracing Web 2.0 in early childhood classrooms takes courage. There is much fear among the general public about what’s known as “social networking.” Understandably, parents want to keep their kids safe. But the teachers who describe their work in this article have decided to address this fear by demonstrating in their classrooms the power of social networking in relation to children’s literacy practices. We already know that children from ages 8–18 spend more time with media than on any other activity besides sleeping, and we also know that visiting social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook is the most popular computer activity for that age group (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), so the idea that these new media should be kept out of the classroom or the idea that Web 2.0 is somehow irrelevant to the teaching of reading seems naïve at best.

As far back as 1998, however, Mrs. Bailey described feeling peer pressure from other teachers in her building to conform to a more “serious,” even “militaristic” pedagogic model, especially when she was confronted with many challenging students one year. When she described her vision as being “activity-centered,” addressing many different “learning styles,” she also described meeting with resistance from colleagues: “When I started out, I knew that I wanted (my classroom) to be activity based. . . . And I tell you it’s frowned on . . . I know there are a lot of buildings in which I would not fit in at all.” One teacher in her building suggested that Paula needed “more structure, . . . put those kids in rows.”

The early childhood educators who describe their work in this article continue the fight that Paula and others before her began as they look past the barriers that exist and forge a new kind of literacy, even as they also acknowledge that many of our elementary classrooms have been home to multiliteracies all along.

Kelly Doyle

First-Grade Teacher
Kirtland Elementary School, Kirtland, Ohio
www.kirtland.k12.oh.us/KES/Doyle

Young children have many stories to tell and need an outlet for sharing them. At my school in a small town on the far east side of Cleveland, I have found that using blogs provides my children with an unlimited platform as well as a familiar audience. Around November each year, I introduce my first-grade students to our classroom blog by explaining that this is their own special place on the Internet where they can share ideas, stories, and feelings whenever they’d like. For the first couple of weeks, I use the Smart Board to model how to access the site and log on using the username and password that I have given to them. The platform I use, www.21classes.com, can be open to public viewing; however, only people with the username and password are able to make comments on the designated blog. This helps to protect the children from reading any comments that may be inappropriate. I make sure to provide parents with instructions so they can help their child access the site at home, although I do provide plenty of opportunities for students to blog at school, in case they do not have Internet access.

www

www

The first category I use for blogging is a basic one called, “Let’s Blog.” Here, students can write about anything; usually, they just write me to say hi or tell me what they did over the weekend. The informality of this venue helps the children overcome any insecurity issues they have with their writing or spelling abilities. For a couple of weeks, the students become familiar with the site and the idea of blogging. During my daily morning meeting, I make sure to check the blog and see if any students have posted. Not only does the child who blogged enjoy this activity, but the rest of the children truly love reading their friends’ posts. Once I feel that the children are familiar with the site and are ready to move to the next step, I add more categories. Also, I provide a category for my previous students to keep in touch with me. My current students like reading what they have to say, and it provides a good model for them to begin blogging.

Each year, I think of new ways that blogging can fit into the first-grade curriculum, and each year, I notice how engaged the students are. You may think of blogging as fitting into the “writing” part of the curriculum, but there are so many more possibilities. I have had parents of struggling readers tell me that their child will spend long periods of time sitting in front of the computer reading what their classmates have written. Aside from creative writing exercises, my students also use the blog for book talks, responses to stories that we have read, and book recommendations for other readers. Later in the year, my students love to pose and solve math story problems and number riddles.

I use the blog for assessments in science and social studies as well. Recently, I had my students record everything they learned about our unit on matter. I was amazed at how engaged they were at the computer lab, and even my hesitant writers produced a few meaningful sentences. There is also a section on my blog where parents have the opportunity to write a message to the students or myself. Our classroom blog slowly begins to grow, and the children really gain a sense of belonging and autonomy by seeing their own work published on the Internet.

I see many benefits to using a blog in the elementary classroom. As the year goes on, the students become more eager to read what others have written, and I have noticed that this helps

them become less egocentric and more open to what others are sharing. In this computerized world, it is not only important for beginning readers to learn to read from books, but it is also necessary for them to decode words off of a screen. I have also noticed that my struggling readers and writers seem to gain confidence from blogging. They become less focused on the actual spelling of words while writing, spelling phonetically instead, which is an appropriate way to write in first grade! Blogging is also a great way for my more passive and shy students to have an opportunity to voice their stories, thoughts, and opinions without being overshadowed by those children with stronger personalities. I definitely believe it is never too early to start having students blogging in the classroom.

Jeff Horwitz

Second-Grade Teacher

Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School, St. Louis, Missouri

<http://globetrotters.wikispaces.com>

<http://twitter.com/globalrams>

I got into Twittering this summer and thought it was the best source of Professional Development that I had encountered in my almost 10-year teaching career. The 2009–2010 school year is the first in which we have tried to Twitter with our two second-grade classes at Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day school, an independent school located in suburban St. Louis. We knew that this would be a learning process for not just us, but for the parents, school, and kids.

To clear up misconceptions that parents and teachers have about Twitter, we offered opportunities for them to come in, with their laptops, and learn. Those who were interested could sign up to use Twitter at that time. This was a great first step, and we had a modest turnout. The students have really loved being able to tweet to their parents throughout the day. It allows parents to be informed instantly about our activities on a minute-to-minute basis. Now when their child gets into the car at the end of the day, instead of asking, “How was your day?” they can now say, “How did your writing assignment turn out?”

Trying a new technology like this with kids does have its risks. Our first incident occurred when a student posted something hurtful about



another student, but she was not aware that anyone would see it because she was tweeting to her mom at the time. This opened up a productive discussion with the whole group (again) about what was an appropriate tweet, and it has not been a problem since. I think it is important to expose children to these tools, since they will be independently using them someday soon. They must learn with a safety net what is appropriate and safe.

To that end, we have set up rules and guidelines to keep everyone safe. Using Twitter’s listing tool, we have created lists of classrooms we follow as parents and teachers. The students are asked to stay on our lists rather than on our feed or mentions. This redundancy is aimed at keeping tweets of a more adult nature away from them. We have also made our account private. During the beginning phase of this project, however, we did make our tweets public to encourage followers. To protect ourselves, we enabled a Twitter verification tool, True Twit, which kept spammers from following us. As the teacher, I find it is important to keep up with our followers and block any inappropriate users. Another safety measure we instituted was using a global account for which only I have the password, so students cannot tweet from home. I do my best to keep students safe; further, I am prepared to have tough conversations from

time to time about safety when using any social media. It’s never too early to prepare our students.

Another safety accommodation we made at the beginning was using Tweetie to allow us to post video tweets, but we had to learn how to be safe on the Web. Children were instructed that we should never share our face and our name together. Now we tweet with our initials and they are good about it. They even teach the parents to do this because they can be the ones to blow our cover!

This process has been worthwhile for many reasons. From a technical perspective, students have become more comfortable on the computer. More academically, the students have authentic writing opportunities with an authentic audience. They have an opportunity to connect with classrooms around the world and learn about them organically by asking their own questions. And taking time out of their day to tweet allows them to solidify memories of their day. It has helped parents and students change the all too familiar answer to the question, “What did you do today?” from “nothing” to “we worked on our . . . and I read”

We are teaching our students to communicate, collaborate, and use technological tools to create learning networks that will enable them to become more successful learners in the 21st century.

J. T. Kuzior

*Third-Grade Teacher
Kleckner Elementary, Green, Ohio
<http://www.mrkuzioronline.com>*



As a third-grade teacher, I wanted to find a way to write, respond, and discuss topics in a digital format (e.g., websites, discussion boards) with my students who came from a suburban community outside Akron. Then, a teacher in Florida told me about Thinkquest by Oracle Education Foundation. This site seemed to be well managed and user friendly for third graders. After some trial and error, I was able to set each student up with their own unique username and password for access. (This log-in skill is an important feature that students will need to know throughout their lives, since we use it for almost anything online.) Thinkquest also has a system by which each student gets his or her own homepage. These

homepages can store pictures, discussion boards, voting, and links that are all run by the students. Finally, Thinkquest also allowed me to set up different assignments, which the students complete in a predetermined amount of time.

The year that I discovered Thinkquest, I was also in the middle of graduate school. The setup on Thinkquest was very similar to one of the courses I was doing for a master's degree. It amazed me that my students and I were working through a similar process: we were all required to post intelligent responses to posted questions, and were then graded on how well we followed directions and discussed topics. For instance, during that first experience with Thinkquest, I created language arts assignments for which students earned a writing grade based on spelling, punctuation, grammar, and direction following. We wrote book reviews, discussed works of literature, and voted on the next titles we would read. This year, I have extended my use of Thinkquest to Social Studies and Science. Through the pages I set up, students have access to pictures, links, voting, and, of course, their own postings. Although the students seem to enjoy the whole experience, the response to online posting has been especially astonishing. Moreover, once students finish their online assignments, they can modify their homepages, update their personal votes, vote on other students' topics, and message other people.

Thinkquest has a very effective messaging service that gave the students an opportunity to talk or instant message with me once their work was completed. I was amazed at how many students took advantage of this. Everyone—from the most talkative to the quietest student—took time to share their daily plans, ask me questions about my likes and dislikes, or hold a conversation with me—a rare treat. It really gave me a new outlook on communicating with my third graders! I knew this aspect of Thinkquest was successful when the students took time to send me messages and modify their pages from their own homes.

Overall, I have been very impressed with using this website in our classroom. The students have many opportunities to use skills that will be important in their near future. Thinkquest is very safe and secure as well—a justifiable consideration when 50 of your students are logging into their website! I feel confident about its security and its effectiveness in promoting literacy prac-

tices that are important to students' development as readers, writers, and thinkers.

Jody Hayes

*Fourth- and Fifth-Grade Teacher
Our Lady of Lourdes School
Palmerston North, New Zealand*

Class blog: <http://tiny.cc/voyagers>

Class website: www.olol.school.nz/voyagers.html

Team wiki: <http://ololsensyn.wikispaces.com>

Conversation is the heart of my fourth- and fifth-grade classroom in Palmerston North, a small rural city in the central north island of New Zealand. This Catholic school currently has an enrollment of 140 children. Many of our conversations occur in our physical classroom, but you will also find our students holding conversations in lots of other places, thanks to both Web 2.0 tools and the fact that I work in a school with “a kind of filterless bliss” (Kist, 2010, p. 97) due to a very supportive principal and Board of Trustees.

Here in New Zealand, the classroom teacher teaches all curriculum, and the children remain together as a group for virtually the whole day. My classroom has desks, chairs, three Internet-equipped computers, a digital camera, and basics such as pens and paper. I am a “normal” classroom teacher, with no special skills in ICT (information communication technology); in fact, I went to school before computers were generally used for learning.

I strongly believe that the development of authentic conversation skills in a range of situations is important for the future success of my students. Conversation opens discussion, exposes us to new and challenging ideas, and allows us to communicate in mutually respectful ways. With this passionate belief at the heart of my own teaching and learning, I was naturally led toward the use of social networking within the school context. I saw these new literacies as ways of ensuring that the children in my class and I would all learn the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly technological and information-based world.

I have pursued my own learning in ways different than any I imagined when I graduated from teachers' college. I value the collegial support that stems from being a member of the global learning community through reading others' blogs, having access to ideas from educational communities

other than my own, and participating in ongoing debate. Every once in a while, I am able to meet in person educators with whom I have collaborated via email, Skype, wikis, or through my RSS blog reading. When I do, I experience a sense of connection. This global community gives me access to expert support, alleviating the need for me to have all the answers. And the students in my class are often able to offer the technical support I do not possess; they introduce me to new literacies and tell me why they think they are worthy or powerful.

New literacies are part of our daily class life. I believe in skills that have application outside of the classroom setting, so we focus on technology as a tool for learning—for all students, families, and community members. For example, our families are able to be active participants in the life of the classroom regardless of where they work or live, or even whether they have daily face-to-face contact with their children. I ensure this by posting class photos to Flickr. This has proven to be very popular with families, opening up more in-depth conversations than the traditional, “What did you do at school today?” “Nothing.” This kind of connection is important in a fast-paced world.

As a teacher, I build the learning conversations around a “learning buddy” philosophy. As learners become more skilled in communicating with one another, the learning conversations become more sophisticated and complex. For example, learning buddies seek and provide constructive critique leading to an awareness of audience. We are able to be explicit about what we do when using digital tools (e.g., cameras, scanners, garage band). We share our emerging ideas as well as presentation pieces; the process is important. We want to show our struggles to make meaning.

A typical day has my students using multiple tools to become deeply involved in learning conversations, but some basics need to be in place in order for that to happen. To guide the students through the first few weeks at school and familiarize them with this style of learning, I use think-alouds and teacher modeling to introduce the language of making informed choices. Choice is crucially important, but it is a skill that takes time to develop and use effectively. To this end, I ask the children to bring their rich ideas, their imaginations, and their determination to class every day.

To begin the year, we have a simple class blog on which I post at least once a week; that enables me to share some of the language we use in learning conversations and to post photos from our class work. Incorporating the type of language that we use in class helps inform our wider learning community, modeling how we interact with one another. The children also have their own blogs where they post about what is important to them. It always intrigues me that, as we get further into the academic year, their posts naturally reflect what we are learning about in class, with no need to assign topics. These posts give me a real insight into their emerging inquiry research and how they are making connections with what they know. Inquiry learning is a collaborative process. Our blog audience motivates us, adds to our conversation, and interacts with our developing ideas.

Community education is vitally important to ensure the wider learning community understands that this is “real” learning, rather than merely the latest fad. My class is able to use emerging social technology as and when it suits our inquiry-based learning model, in which deep thinking is encouraged and supported. In addition to blogging, we use a wide variety of other new media. For example, through speaking to other classes via Skype, we are able to research and collect data to answer our self-selected questions. We also view and reflect on a wide variety of YouTube videos, looking carefully at the appeal of this style of storytelling. I use this very appealing form of literacy—simple filmmaking—on a regular basis in class. For example, when studying animals from around the world, the students created a sock puppet and 2D habitat and then recorded short movies on Photobooth to share their findings. These quickly became favorite viewing within class and had an amazing number of hits online.

A significant percentage of our classroom work is available online in various formats. As a result, we have to ensure our work has clarity, impact, and appeal. We know we’ll hear from our audience if it is lacking. Many of the criteria by which we evaluate our work look like the criteria of traditional teaching and learning—persuasive writing still remains persuasive writing, regardless of how it is shared or recorded. The vehicle has changed, but the literacy skill remains the same.

Our learning and conversations do not stop at the end of the school day; they go with us because

we are connected. This collaborative approach values student voice and requires flexibility, the teaching of cooperative and collaborative skills, and a letting go of unnecessary control. My students are beginning to develop this by doing things such as bringing their interviews in on thumb drives rather than in written format, joining Facebook at home and discussing school work with their friends in a social setting, texting about our inquiry question, and blogging from home. We do not use Facebook at school; though I think it has great possibilities, I doubt my school community is ready for that. However, I do actively encourage discussion of how to interact in these conversations “safely.” Some of my students even tell me they share on Facebook about what we are learning and transfer their podcasts made in class to mp3 and post them online.

The formation of strong links between home and school is exciting for me to watch. Students are really taking ownership, and what we have begun in class has snowballed—there is unlimited potential for learning to take place! The challenge for me as a teacher is to look beyond what I am already comfortable with—the media used is not important; the attitude of the teacher is.

References

- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fingeret, L. (2008). *March of the penguins: Building knowledge in a kindergarten classroom*. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 96–103.
- Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect: Australian Journal of TESOL*, 5(7), 7–16.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Teenagers in new times: A new literacy studies perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 412–420.
- Hassett, D. D., & Curwood, J. S. (2009). Theories and practices of multimodal education: The instructional dynamics of picture books and primary classrooms. *The Reading Teacher*, 63, 270–282.
- Kaiser Family Foundation. (2010). *Generation M²: Media in the lives of 8- to 18-year-olds*. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>.
- Kist, W. (2010). *The socially networked classroom: Teaching in the new media age*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Lotherington, H., & Chow, S. (2006). Rewriting “Goldilocks” in the urban, multicultural elementary school. *The Reading Teacher*, 60, 242–252.
- Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adult & Adolescent Literacy*, 43, 448–461.
- Van Leeuwen, C. A., & Gabriel, M. A. (2007). Beginning to write with word processing: Integrating writing process and technology in a primary classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 60, 420–429.
- Williams, T. L. (2007). “Reading” the painting: Exploring visual literacy in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 60, 636–642.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing identity texts through Disney princess play. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44, 57–83.

William Kist is an associate professor at Kent State University. **Kelly Doyle** is a first-grade teacher at Kirtland Elementary School in Kirtland, Ohio. **Jody Hayes** is Deputy Principal and classroom teacher at Our Lady of Lourdes School, Palmerston North, New Zealand. **Jeff Horwitz** is a second-grade teacher at Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School in St. Louis, Missouri. **J. T. Kuzior** is a third-grade teacher at Kleckner Elementary School in Green, Ohio.

CHILDREN’S LITERATURE ASSEMBLY SILENT AUCTION

The Children’s Literature Assembly invites you to participate in a Silent Auction featuring original artwork by children’s illustrators. To see artwork and obtain details regarding participation, visit our website at <http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org/>.