"Engaging our intermediate and secondary students in cross-curricular writing though the use of technology"

Inquiry Team:

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Background:

Avon Maitland District School Board has established non-fiction writing as the main focus within its 2008-2009 Board Improvement Plan. Following the research of Dr. Reeves, students who increase their practice of non-fiction writing show improvements in overall student learning. Some of the high-yield strategies that make up the Plan includes teacher moderation and focused instructional strategies such as the use of performance walls.

Using the opportunity provided through the London Region MISA Professional Network Centre, a group of educators from two Avon Maitland District School Board schools work together on a collaborative inquiry focused around engaging students in cross-curricular writing by using technology. The schools included one senior elementary school (gr 4-8) and a secondary school from the same community.

> *Will the use of common assessment, focused instructional strategies and teacher moderation in Grade 7, 8 and 9 Geography, with an emphasis on the use and application of technology, increase student interest and achievement in expository writing in Geography?*

The Inquiry

When the team came together, there was a lot of discussion about what technology would best fit the needs of the inquiry to get students writing in geography. With the direction from the Board's technologist, the team decided to focus on the use of Google Docs to allow students to collaborate on geography projects, and wikis to share their finished projects.

The teachers involved in the project had various levels of comfort with technology, but none of them had previous experience with Google Docs nor wikis. This proved to be a benefit, since the initial meetings allowed all to focus on learning the online tools and discuss how the tools could be used effectively in their various classrooms.

> *[It was] great to work with others, especially the DCVI teachers, learning the new technology, having the release time to learn and prepare together.*

While the teachers were learning about the new technology, they also focused on the common assessment that they might use in the inquiry. In the end, their assessments were common in theme and form – creating an informative slideshow about a topic in geography. The assessments did differ, though, due to the curriculum expectations and the time frames the project allowed.

Each teacher brought the Board's technologist into the classroom to assist students in the use of Google Docs, with a discussion about the appropriate safety rules and etiquette. Once the teacher introduced the geography project, the students were able to work on the project using class time on the computer.

> *They sat together as a group, each with their own computer and helped each other find data, images, get comfortable with google docs. Students worked at their own ability levels. Some also liked the idea that they could continue on this at home.*

> *The engagement while working on their projects was amazing. Even supply teachers could have them working on it and they were almost always focused and on task. The projects were well done for the short amount of time that we had. I also think the nature of this project was better for the short time period.*

Inquiry Challenges:

While the technology did allow most students to work well together as a collaborative group on their assessment, the technology didn't buy-over all students.

> *We used both [Google Docs and the wiki]. I did not like using either of them. I didn't find this too exciting.*

Also, there was the challenge of the technology being available at home. While some students had access to computers and high-speed internet, this was not universal so more class time was required for students to work on their projects to ensure all students could complete their projects.

From the teachers' perspective, the timeline of the project was the most difficult part. From February to April, the team was able to come together to learn the different technology and focus their assessment in a series of 6 half day meetings. This left very little time for the technology to be introduced to the students along with the assessment, and to provide the computer time for students to work on the project.

Asking students to create a geography-based slideshow using information from the internet did lead to the potential problem of plagiarism.

> *[It was a challenge to get] students to understand what plagiarism is. It is too easy for them to do a cut and paste. Students see the internet as a sole source for information…it took two periods of searching before they would move [to the library shelves as well].*

Evaluation of the Inquiry Question:

By the end of the inquiry timeline, it was apparent that the question had to be focused to

> *Will the use of an online tool for collaborating on a common assessment in Grade 7, 8 and 9 Geography increase student interest and achievement in writing in Geography?*

It was this question that the evaluation of the project was based on.

From a teacher's perspective:
> *The students were definitely more engaged while working on the computer to complete their project. From observation and the work that they produced, I know they were interested in what they were working on and the product was of high standards.*

From students' perspective:

> *I was able to communicate with my group member through [Google Docs], and the info would be transferred right away.*
>
> *I found the google docs easy to use, and straight forward. I really liked that we could send the project to each other and edit it in just a little bit of time. It made it very practical.*
>
> *I was able to get a lot more information out of the project. I think that spellcheck and grammercheck would be very helpful to add. [It] would really improve the quality of the projects.*

Next Steps:

In the evaluation of the inquiry project, participants were asked for recommendations for next year. From the teachers, there were two main recommendations:

- allowing more time for the teacher and class to become more comfortable with the technology, and complete the assessment as a group
- provide students with appropriate websites and resource books to begin their research from, thus differentiating the assessment for some students who were struggling with searching and finding information-rich sites at a difficult reading level

From the students, their recommendations varied:

- allow us more time to learn the software
- allow us to use software with more options for the slideshow
- allow us to use software where the teacher cannot read everything we are doing
- take out the wiki; there is no use for it

In reflection of the student's suggestion, it is clear that there are pedagogical reasons why a teacher would still rather use Google Docs, or a similar tool, for student collaboration for just the reasons that students identified as issues.

With respect to measuring the effectiveness of using technology to improve the students' achievement in expository writing in Geography, it would be necessary to use a control group who did not use technology. This seems impossible, though, given the popularity of technology for research and presentations.