2009

"'Proof-revising" with podcasting: Keeping readers in mind as students listen to and rethink their writing.

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September 2008

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Abstract

This article describes a process for proofreading with podcasting for elementary and middle school bloggers. The podcasting technology engages two senses, hearing and seeing. In addition, the audio and text are merged through the voice of a reader, rather than that of the student. Proofreading in this way is used not as a final step to check primarily for errors but rather as a more complex literacy that includes writing, higher-order thinking, and learning to identify with the audience and their needs as readers. We called this process 'proof-revising' to distinguish how it evolved from basic proofreading to a complex literacy.

Introduction

Picture a class of fifth grade bloggers who have just completed stories based on dynamic photographs taken by a frequent commenter on student blogs. Students used a great deal of imagination, had fun composing, and were making good connections. One element was missing though, proofreading to turn their writing into clear, well-organized, and engaging stories for their readers. Students insisted they had reviewed their stories; however, their idea of proofreading involved quick glances over the story. The teacher challenged the students to improve their writing for their readers through the use of technology for more effective proofreading and revising.

All teachers encourage elementary students to check their spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Students are also asked to make sure the story flows and makes sense. Elementary students however often lack an understanding of how their writing comes across to readers. In our project, students were experiencing and learning to communicate with the real audience through blogging. Blogging is a motivator for students to write better as they have an extended audience with whom to connect (Penrod, 2007). Teachers in Felix's (2007) recent study on blogging agree, "[Students] seem to be more motivated to do their best when they know they are publishing for a worldwide audience" (p.157).

With this motivating force in place, the blogging teacher proposed a different approach using teacher podcasts to assist students in proofreading and revision. In our context, the blogging teacher recorded all the podcasts but parents or other volunteers could assist with these recordings.

Proof-revising as a Complex Literacy

For most people proofreading is associated with "making sentence-level revisions" that include "checking for errors of grammar, punctuation, spelling citations, word choice and… also finding typographical errors" (Chromik, 2002, p. 1). The underlying assumption is that if the product requires work, it involves primarily fixing mechanical and usage errors. Because proofreading for surface errors alone is unlikely to help student writers to appreciate their audience's needs as readers, we offer a combination of proofreading and revision in our podcasting approach. A podcast is an audio recording that can be posted on a blog. The podcasting technology engages two senses, hearing and seeing. In addition, audio and text are merged through the voice of a reader, rather than that of the student. We call this process proof-revising. The audio reading by the teacher, acting as a reader of their writing, helps students experience first-hand the reader's reaction to their writing. Such reading shows them where their writing is not understood and where it is enjoyable, engaging, and clear for readers. Proof-revising in this way creates for student writers the opportunity to "listen for meaning as a stranger listens," which involves attending to "what is actually written, not to what the author intended to say" (Hanna, 1962, p. 482).

The goal is to make students willing to *rethink and revise* their writing to make it not only clear and precise but also engaging for readers. Rowe complains about the challenge of "getting students to *revise* their writing" (1998, p. 100). We believe that this initial reluctance may be overcome when student writers themselves come to realize that even though what they have written may read as clear and engaging to

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them, it may not be perceived in the same way by their readers. Our podcasts of student writing test the communicative effectiveness of their prose to the reader. As Rowe (1998) puts it, "Students need to understand that the good ideas in their heads must be communicated effectively in order to be understood by their readers" (p. 101). How can we help students to develop such understanding?

Our answer to this question is to teach students proof-revising that is both revision and copyediting. While revision calls for rethinking and rewriting their work to produce effective and engaging writing for readers, copyediting leaves it free from mechanical and usage errors. As students step outside their shoes and identify with the audience and their needs as readers of their writing, they begin to comprehend the big picture of how their writing comes across to their blog readers. They also learn about the power they have over the written language to make their writing clear, precise, and engaging to their readers (Rowe, 1998). Auditory input plays a critical role. Like text-to-speech software, podcasts help students "to listen to drafts to improve their logic and fluency" (Hecker & Engstrom, 2005). However, unlike typical voice recognition software that does the work for students—the program transcribes student reading of text to text, podcasts engage students actively. This is because listening to podcasts asks students to analyze and modify their writing to make it clearer and more articulate. Through actively comparing and adjusting their writing to the reader's reaction, students develop the metacognitive skills of monitoring, diagnosing, revising and editing, the skills critical for improving the quality of their writing (Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, van den Bergh, & van Hout-Walters, 2004.) The podcasting approach makes

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it a multi-sensory process. The student receives prompt feedback. These components

and high expectations from the teacher create an environment promoting learning.

Scaffolding the Technology and Proof-revising Process

To probe students' understanding of proofreading, the teacher asked these

questions: "When you proofread, do you use any resources such as a dictionary, spell

checker or someone else?" "When you make changes in your writing, are they usually

small or big changes?" "How do you know that your readers understand what you

mean?" Based upon students' responses, the teacher learned that the process was a

quick re-read and most felt their writing was good. Students reported having used

computer spell-checking, reminders from teachers, peer editors, and worksheets. They

rarely asked themselves if their readers understood. Their focus was on small changes

involving mechanical errors. Our approach was to offer specific and personalized

feedback through teacher podcasts of each story. The teacher introduced the

podcasting approach rationale: "When you listen to a story read aloud by someone

else, it helps you hear things as they are specifically written. When you proof with your

eyes only, you read it like you think you wrote it. You don't always catch errors."

Teacher podcasts were initially personal communications between student and

teacher. They provided a model that was influential in developing proof-revising that is

reader centered but in a "writerly" manner (Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, &

Whitin, 2006, p. 256). That is, the students were asked to review their writing in light of

their readers' needs: being able to understand, follow, and enjoy creativity and

imagination embedded within. The podcasts, once personal communications and now

blog published, makes the process transparent for other educators and students to

consider for application.

Should students later create proof-revising podcasts for their peers, direct

teacher instruction of this process would be necessary. Reading a paper correctly word-

for-word, as it is written through the voice of another reader, needs to be done

carefully. It is a process new to students and requires practice.

Constructing a podcast is easy. What is needed is: a) a computer with a

microphone; b) recording software such as Audacity, and c) a driver such as Lame to

export a podcast project to MP3 format. Both software pieces can be downloaded free

from the web at http://audacity.sourceforge.net/ and

http://audacity.sourceforge.net/help/faq?s=install&item=lame-mp3.

The basic steps and screenshots to record on Audacity are as follows: [For bullets 1-7,
insert here Figures 1-7]
1. Download the Audacity Program.
2. Open Audacity.
3. Click the pink Record button to begin talking and recording your story.
4. Click the yellow **Stop** button when you finish recording the story.
5. Go to the File menu and save as a project.
6. Download LAME driver. Once downloaded, unzip and extract it to the folder where you
installed Audacity (Program Files --> Audacity).
7. Go to the File menu and export the project as MP3, a file that you can place on a blog or
the web.

Additional screenshots and tutorials are available at:
http://www.guidesandtutorials.com/audacity-tutorial.html

As students engaged in the proof-revising process, the teacher asked them to

revisit their story drafts. They were to listen to the podcast of each of their stories. The

students' task was to improve the fluency of the writing by paying attention to the

following questions:

- Does my story flow?

- Does it make sense?

- Does it sound like I thought I had written it?

- Would I have read it the same way?

- Can punctuation help?

- Did misspellings or wording change my meanings?

To facilitate the task of reading and listening simultaneously, students were instructed to open the podcast of their story on the class blog and to use their individual blogs to follow along. This required students to have two windows open. There was a lot of confusion on the first attempt. Some were mesmerized by the screen designs appearing on their podcast. Others did not know where to begin. The teacher suggested they follow along using a sheet of paper to track words across the screen as they listened. This time they realized they needed to pay attention. They listened again.

Students recognized how this helped their writing and communication. Michael noticed (all names in this publication are pseudonyms)

," …I thought that I had no errors until I heard the podcast which said the mistakes." M.V. realized," … mistakes can actually be useful because they tell you what you can improve on."

They began to develop self-monitoring habits. They were learning to notice how their writing sounded as it was written and to draw conclusions on how it should have looked in print to reflect their original intent. A class discussion followed with students sharing discoveries. Many were surprised to learn that their writing was not exactly as

they had thought it had been. They even found some errors humorous and others were dismayed about their actual writing. They were beginning not only to understand the complexities of proof-revising but also to appreciate its value. This discussion culminated in students creating mini podcasts with proof-revising pointers for themselves and peers. Here is the advice they offered.

Victoria said, "…You shouldn't use the same word over and over again. You should change your words and make them more interesting to the reader."

Mia suggested, "What I learned is to let somebody read your story, like to recheck your story."

Anni advised, "… think about what you are going to write, like you need a brainstorm before you do anything else."

T.K. interjected, "…when you are writing, always pay attention."

And Leslie summarized the entire podcasting experience on a blog post,

> When I started writing the story I was careless. But when I read it over I saw the mistakes and it made me realize that I really was being careless. I know that next time I will try to improve on my grammar. When the other person reads your work they will not understand what you are trying to say and that would not be good because what if it is something really really good and they don't

understand it. It would make you feel good if they understood what you were trying to say [unedited student post].

Students were proud of their new understandings and began to embrace the concept of proof-revising focused on making meaning clearer to the reader. The teacher observed carry-over in the next class, as many students were reading aloud their revisions as well as brainstorming with classmates to make their writing effective and engaging for readers.

Final Reflections

Proof-revising is a complex literacy that requires practice with a real audience in an authentic writing context such as classroom blogging. It is a challenge for both students and teachers; but one that can improve student communication skills and literacies. It exemplifies seamless integration of technology into a complex thinking and learning task that goes beyond editing for surface errors and engages students in rereading, listening, thinking, and relating to the audience. Having the blogs and podcasts public lets others view students' responses and contribute additional improvements. This approach is not one to be used daily in the classroom but selectively and purposefully from time to time. Since teacher time investment is always crucial, the teacher may choose only excerpts from student writing for podcast reading. Ideally, excerpts selected should reflect both areas of strength and weakness in each student's communication with the audience. This lets the teacher provide individual feedback. While additional revisions and editing still needs to be continued through reteaching or

the use of other tools, proof-revising through podcasting is worth exploring further in

our classrooms.

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