They call me Mr. MOODLE: How I used my Virtual Learning Environment to increase the motivation in my Writer’s Workshop: A Self-Study

MICHAEL McCLENAGHAN

Abstract

This is a self-study in reflecting on one teacher’s journey of exploration of the use of a MOODLE, a virtual learning environment, to teach writing. As I used the MOODLE to expand and improve my writer’s workshop, I noticed increased student engagement, peer collaboration, authentic publication, embedded accountability and metacognitive reflection.

Introduction

As a classroom teacher, I am constantly seeking ways to do better in my teaching. Inspired by Whitehead’s (1999) notion of action reflection, I am continually asking myself: “How can I improve my practice?” With this question in mind, I turned my gaze towards my writer’s workshop in my Grade 6 classroom.

My writer’s workshop, borne from the ideas presented by Calkins (1994), has been an important part of my literacy program for years. As I have come to interpret Calkin’s work, the writer’s workshop is a structure that helps create a community of writers, wherein everyone is engaged in a writerly life. We all work on writing, individually and collaboratively, living our lives as writers. Writing is alive, the craft of writing is honoured and respected, and each writer has a stake in improving his/her own work. The writer’s workshop, if successful, becomes a self-sustaining organism, fully alive with the wonder and creativity of writing.

I am a fairly organized teacher. I have had file-folder portfolios with entire cabinets devoted to the work done by my students. Students own their meticulously-crafted writing folders, laminated and folded, complete with checklists and clip-art. I had the cosmetic structures well in place, but never felt I had a truly functioning writer’s workshop. More often than not, I was engaged in the management of the program, rather than the writing within the program. The overall problem, one that has been prompting my reflection, has been motivation. How can I get all my students to write?

I have wrestled with this question of motivation for some time now. I have asked my students periodically why they write. Answers range from the depressing “I don’t know” to “Because you told us to.” Students have done some great writing, but their motivation to write was to please me, not because it was important to them to do. I want my students to write because they feel that it is important to write.

This paper is the culmination of my reflections and actions as I endeavoured to enhance the motivation of all of my students. In this paper I identify parts of my existing workshop that I felt were not working, and then describe how I put measures in place to improve my practice.
**Purpose**

There are four principles underpinning my reflections. First, in order for students to write well, they need to be **engaged** with what they are writing. Solis (2008), building off the work of others (McLachlin et. al., 2005), defines two different types of student engagement: procedural engagement and substantial engagement. Procedural engagement is basic attention to the lesson, following the rules and routines, and even opening the writing folder at the appropriate time. Substantial engagement, as Solis (2008) says, is where students really “get it” (p. 1). This is where students really dig into the writing. They are truly engaged.

When teaching writing, I have spent a lot of time tackling the form or genre that I wanted students to learn to write. Each month would bring about the study of a different form of writing, complete with an analysis of the components of that type of writing. I shared examples and then everyone tried writing something of the chosen genre. Within this confining, teacher-oriented structure, each student tried to come up with a topic of his/her own choice. Some faked their way through the month, spending time “thinking about what to write”, interested in nothing and accomplishing nothing. This was not working. I wanted students to be more fully engaged in their writing. I thought about principles of writers’ workshop that related to engagement.

The second principle is that students need to publish it in a way that is **authentic**, that is, publishing for “an audience beyond the classroom” (Slagle, 1997, p. 20). If there is no authentic audience, then student writers feel that there is no real reason to write. There is no point to it. In my teacher-oriented structure, I felt that the pieces of student work needed to travel through me. I believed that students needed to know that their writing would be read. In a class of 25 students working on multiple pieces, that translated to an incredible amount of writing that funneled through me in order to be published. This was not working to motivate my students to write, so I decided to encourage publication for an audience other than myself. I believed that students would try to improve their writing for an authentic audience, thinking that if the text were going to be read by someone else, it would have to be good.

The third principle is that students need to **collaborate** meaningfully with their peers. Roshelle and Teasley (1995) define collaboration as “a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem” (p. 70).

I have devoted hours to hosting sharing sessions, modeling lessons on how to collaborate, giving descriptive feedback and working together. But I have never been able to get students to collaboratively work together in creating excellent pieces of writing. The most motivated students ended up sharing and only with my direct attention. This teacher-oriented structure allowed the successful writers to get better (being entirely dependent on my approval), and the rest of the class continuing to plod along. This also was not working. The students needed to collaborate effectively and meaningfully with each other to produce quality pieces of work. It is through this focused talk that students are able to think more deeply about their writing. I still needed to conference with the students to focus on certain required skills, but students also needed to work together to produce quality work.

Finally, in order to truly live a writerly life, my students needed to think and reflect critically on their writing. The fourth principle is that students need to develop their **metacognition** skills in writing. Chang-Wells and Wells (1995) describe metacognition as “knowledge about one’s own mental processes and the control of those processes to achieve one’s
intended goal” (p. 58). I found that students needed to reflect independently on their writing, in addition to conferencing with me. I needed to move beyond a teacher-oriented structure.

There were many areas of my writer’s workshop that were not working. I needed to increase student engagement, foster effective peer collaboration, encourage authentic publication, and create a space for critical reflection. Through a self-study methodology (Loughran, 2007) I reflected on how I was increasing student motivation through my MOODLE. In the following, I discuss the actions I took to address these issues, and then reflect on the effectiveness of these actions.

The research questions guiding my inquiry were:

1. How can I motivate students to write using a MOODLE?
2. How can I teach student to reflect metacognitively on their writing using a MOODLE?

I begin by explaining what a MOODLE is and then describe my new teaching practices and the outcomes in terms of student engagement with writing.

What is a MOODLE?

A MOODLE “is an Open Source Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It has become very popular among educators around the world as a tool for creating online dynamic web sites for their students” (Moodle.org.) Within my MOODLE, my students can blog, create wikis and webpages, answer questionnaires and surveys, and they can collaborate, publish, create and innovate! It is not an extension of my classroom, rather it IS my classroom!

The MOODLE is a virtually accessed space that can house a multitude of different resources and activities. I use this space to host my entire classroom activities and lessons. I can post assignments, host discussions and wikis, and create quizzes and surveys. Students can access this virtual classroom from any internet connection, requiring only a web browser, a username and password. As this can be viewed from any location with an Internet connection, my students’ parents also have a constant window into my classroom. It is so much more than a web page for communication: it is a fully and truly interactive space.

Research Context: Using the MOODLE to Improve my Writer’s Workshop

Within my MOODLE space, I had created different topics for each large unit of study. In my Grade 6 classroom, I had six units of study, integrating science and social studies topics into my literacy program. Within each unit of study, the writer’s workshop follows this structure: assessment writing task, writing work, writing log and a unit portfolio.

The assessment writing task launches the writing unit. This writing task is a meaningful piece of writing. Among the writing tasks I assign are a persuasive letter to the director of education convincing him to either close or keep open a local outdoor education facility; a diary entry of a typical day in the life of a First Nations boy and girl; and a report outlining the environmental costs and benefits of building an airport on local conservation land. I launch the unit with a prompt that I hope will inspire quality writing. Each student independently completes the writing and I meet individually with her/him to provide rich descriptive feedback and collaboratively set attainable goals to work towards in the upcoming unit of work.
For each set of writing skills, as a class, we create targets for success, which are posted on the MOODLE for each student to refer. These targets are also posted around the classroom and provide a constant reminder of what it means to be successful in writing.

Developing and Organizing Content
Targets for Success

Purpose and Audience
1.1 Identify the topic, purpose, and audience for a variety of writing forms
1.2 Generate ideas about a potential topic and identify those most appropriate for the purpose
Review
1.8 Determine whether the ideas and information they have gathered are relevant, appropriate, and adequate for the purpose, and do more research if necessary

We are learning to stretch out and expand our ideas to prepare us to write.

We know we've been successful if:

- we have thought about what, why, to whom, as whom
- we have a lot of ideas
- there are bubbles off of bubbles
- the ideas that we are going to use are good, on topic, make sense
- we discard some ideas that aren't good
The following graphic shows the cluster of expectations that I have used for our Flight Unit, our second last of the year:

![Electricity: Writing Work](image)

Hello Chasers,

This is your space to practice your writing during our unit on Electricity. Your challenge, within the next 5 weeks, is to write 6 longer and more complex texts; published on the MOODLE, at least 1 done collaboratively; at least 2 related to Electricity; from different purposes for writing.

**REMEMBER - You are practising your skills in writing!**

Your writing should reflect something you need to work on - refer to your Writing Assessment. In this unit, we are working on:

- Developing and Organizing Content:
  - Purpose and Audience (What do you have to write? Why? To who? As whom?)
  - Developing Ideas; planning
- Form and Style in Writing
  - Form (type of writing)
  - Point of View
  - Word Choice
  - Revision
- Language Conventions and Presentation
  - Spelling (familiar and unfamiliar words)

I look forward to reading your writing!

It is around these skills that I build my mini-lessons, my guided writing groups and individual conference sessions, all leading the students to an independent demonstration of these skills within their writing work.

Using the eight purposes for writing from the NEW First Steps in Writing (Western Australia Minister for Education, 2006), I then provide a structure for students to come up with what to write over the course of the unit. For example, in our science unit on flight, our writing target was to have written three longer and more complex texts, with different purposes for writing. Though this provides some restrictions, within these parameters they are free to be creative and can chose to create meaningful texts that draw from their own interests.
I provide a forum for the students to publish their work. On the MOODLE, a forum is an activity which all the students can see and respond. I post the discussion topics, one for each of the purposes for writing. It is here that the students publish their writing so all in the class can see it.
Within each forum, I have provided the following structure for the writing. These are the steps students need to complete in order to share their work:

1. Questions to ask: (e.g., What you are writing (form)? Why you are writing it (purpose)? Who you are writing it to (audience)? Who are you writing it as (role)?)

2. Components of the various forms of writing and an example of a mentor text (e.g., I am writing a menu. A good menu has... Here is my mentor text.)

Most students rely on their own schema when creating different writing pieces. This process of examining a good mentor text (a really good example of that type of writing) has really elevated the quality of writing that students compose, allowing for more meaningful texts to be published. The mentor text has taken two different forms. The first is an excellent example of what the student is trying to create. This could be a well-written editorial to inspire students’ writing, or a professional complaint to show the student how it could sound. The second form of mentor text has been a procedural piece for that particular type of writing. This piece tells the student HOW to create the particular form they are trying to write. This includes instruction on what to include in that form. This step in particular has been a gift to myself and my teaching. I have always struggled with the thought that I, as one teacher, cannot teach all the different forms and genres of writing. In an effort to combat this, I wanted the students to think like a writer, and to learn what good writing looks like. In understanding the complexities and components of their writing, not only do they have a great example from which to start with, they also have a map to guide the writing.

3. Instructions to attach a plan - either a copy (pdf or jpg file) or a web-link.

I have had tremendous success using programs found on the internet, as they are accessible both from home and at school, and can be inserted within the writing. This way others can see the thinking that occurred to make the writing successful. My preferred program this year has been Mind42, or mind for two (www.mind42.com). Using this program, students can collaborate with others when planning out the writing. This feature alone has been an amazing addition to my writer’s workshop. From the plan, students can work with multiple partners in a manageable way. In this way, the collaboration has helped build the community of writers and has enhanced students’ motivation to write.

4. Instructions to upload the students’ writing.

Traditionally in my writing program, this had been the most tedious and difficult part to manage. Now that students compose virtually, it is easier for them to revise, edit, share and collaborate. No longer are we trying to manage loose papers, misplaced writing folders, false starts and abandoned pieces. The writing happens on the computer, making it easier to manage, revise and publish.

5. Instructions to include a brief explanation on what students are working on with references to our success criteria or feedback from assessments and from a peer.

The last part of the writing process has been a reflection component. The reason for students to write is now to become a better writer, not to please me. This effectively changes the teacher-oriented structure that had been so entrenched in my practice. To track students’ writing, I have created a writing log on the MOODLE. This is simply a list of the different writing pieces that have been created by each student. It gives me a quick check-in to see who is on track and who requires closer supervision and assistance in reaching our classroom goals.

When the writing work is complete, the students then create a digital writing portfolio on the MOODLE; a place where only I can view the student work, to assign a grade and provide
It is a final reminder for the students that they are working towards a writing goal. From this portfolio the students can discuss their work in writing, and show that indeed they have succeeded.

**Research Methods**

My results are based on observations of 28 students’ writing processes during a 10 month period of time. At the time, I had 21 boys in my class, and 7 girls. Within my class a variety of race and cultures was represented, with no one group being a majority. I had a wide range of abilities, with five students being on an Individual Education Plan to address learning needs. I put into place an hour long writing block every day within my dedicated literacy block of an hour and half. I interviewed students through regular conference sessions, pulled students to address targeted learning needs, as well as viewing work published on the MOODLE in an on-going manner.

**Results**

**Student Engagement**

Students chose what they wanted to write, digging into their own interests and expertise. For example, I walked up to a student, staring intently at the large poster that contains the eight purposes, and asked her what she needed to work on. From our conversation, based on her writing goals, we were able to come up with a piece that elicited the incredulous response: “You mean I can write that?” I observed students sharing this excitement and motivating each other in completing their writing pieces together.
**Peer Collaboration**

Students collaborated with each other in a real and rich way. Some students planned together using *Mind42*, others wrote together using GoogleDocs, while others sat together and composed Word documents. I observed students discussing planning strategies, plotting ideas, working on sentence structures, and voice ideas.

Collaboration was also fostered by getting students to ask for feedback from each other. They showed their work to another student and asked for specific feedback. Students became selective in whom they sought for feedback. If they needed feedback on their plan, they could see on the MOODLE who was good at creating a plan, and then they asked that person. Students used what they knew about our community of writers to help themselves. Students regularly responded to each other, both online and in person. I heard almost daily conversations over what was posted, what was appreciated, and what was amazing from my community of writers. They also relied on each other for support. Students sought each other out with questions, problems to solve, words to spell, and phrases to create. Students regularly and spontaneously asked each other for feedback.

Seeing the work of others on the MOODLE has inspired others in the class to go further than I have witnessed before. When one girl decided to take a risk with a writing piece, she inspired others to do the same. She decided to write a complaint from a home-owner to a local agency responsible for sending an unsatisfactory electrician to her home. What followed was a humorous account of all that went wrong in the attempts to fix a faulty circuit, all the while showing what this writer had learned about electricity. This then set off a rush of creativity from the others, who saw her success and wanted to try it themselves. With this initial inspiration other students’ writing became more creative. Students were motivated to write because they could see from others what was possible. I often found that students explored the work created by others, and accessed the links to the mentor text that was the initial inspiration. From here, students could build off the successes of others and produce their own excellent examples. This motivation to write well has transformed the quality of writing in my room.

**Authentic Publishing**

Publishing, in the truest sense, is sharing your work with an audience. Within the class, students, who are fellow writers, are the audience for peers’ writing. I now see that when students feel that it is important to write and have an authentic audience for their writing, they will be more likely to engage fully in their writing. Students, parents, and even other teachers to whom I teach courses on using a MOODLE, view the students’ work. Nothing makes my students prouder than knowing that other teachers are impressed by the writing they are doing.

Our community of writers now takes the art of writing seriously. Students will not let sub-standard writing slide. Since we are all writing for each other to see, we all need to do our very best. There have been cases of plagiarism, cases of copying and pasting from previous units, and just plain laziness that have all been caught by our community, demanding better. Promoting positive peer pressure is a delicate balance, though. Therefore, I use the term, *word community with purpose*. Within our classroom community, we all recognize that we learn in different ways. We know each other, we support each other, we care about each other, and we respect each other. We know what each community member can do that is good work for us, and can help
each other do better. Therefore, there is a safety in sharing our work with each other, as everyone’s work is accepted.

There is also a challenge in sharing with each other. The gauntlet has been thrown, if you will, as some of the first writing pieces published on the MOODLE have been above the standard. This has challenged the rest of the class to do some amazing work. Along with this, the community has called upon everyone to do their very best. There have been times, upon reviewing the work, that some have called upon certain students to do better. We can all see the work, and can recognize when each of us are capable of doing better. Together we have set our writing bar high, and now help each other reach our writing goals.

Throughout the unit, I periodically hold a show and share session. I review with the class the work that has been published. We take this opportunity to discuss what the writing goals have been for each particular writer. We also discuss challenges, successes and areas for improvement for the writer. This is beneficial for the entire class, as it continues the conversations around writing, reviews the expectations, and shares standards of excellence. This adds to student engagement because if the work is being respected, then it becomes more important to do it well. If we all expect and then respect our best, our community thrives. We are motivated to write because we are practicing writing excellence!

This past year, through the six different units of instruction, students have produced 32 different writing pieces, not including various assessments and portfolio reflections. The sheer volume alone, together with all the reading of peers’ writing, has provided students with ample practice and experience to improve as writers. We now have a rich writing community the likes that I have never had before.

Issues I still Deal With

The use of technology is not always easy. This has left me with three main issues that I still deal with:

(1) How can I ensure that students are able to access technology that can help them become better writers? Equity plays an important role here. In my school environment, we encourage students to bring in devices from home. This creates an obvious inequity: there are students who do not have their own devices, whether they are iPods, laptops or cell phones. This is not easy. If I am requiring all students to complete their writing work on the MOODLE, then how do I ensure equity of access for all students? There are no easy answers, and it seems to be a work in progress.

(2) I believe the power of the MOODLE. However, I do know that to structure the writer’s workshop requires a lot of time. I devoted hours to setting up the MOODLE, searching for solutions and networking with computer facilitators. Sharing ideas and knowledge is required if others are going to effectively use the MOODLE. I am fortunate to offer workshops that allow me to share my experiences. Further sharing and networking needs to be fostered if we are going to motivate students to write.

(3) As I have personally discovered, the position of the teacher is important. If the teacher is the center of the writer’s workshop, then the teacher becomes the most important part. However, in using a MOODLE, and carefully crafting the expectations, the writing needs to be the most important part. Students write because the writing is important. I will continue to explore my own position and role within my teaching.
It is a wonderful time to be a teacher who can use technology to improve the quality and quantity of student work. Within a writer’s workshop, students can be motivated to write in online virtual learning environments such as MOODLE. Within this space, teachers can encourage students to create wonderful pieces of writing. The MOODLE has increased motivation within my writer’s workshop, and ultimately, improved my practice.

References


Author Biography

Michael McClenaghan has been a classroom teacher for 14 years. A lover of literacy, teaching students to read and write, to speak, listen, view and represent, has been a passion for all of those years. He has become a leader of technology, both within his school and the board. He has offered several workshops throughout the year to eager teachers wishing to enhance their programs through technology. When not MOODL’ing, he is the proud father of two girls, an avid runner and a budding blogger: www.chasingknowledge.blogspot