



From Morning Message to Digital Morning Message: Moving from the tried and true to the new

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Since technology isn't going to go away and it is changing how we look at ourselves and the world around us, I believe that it is important for schools to help students develop technological skills that will equip them for the future. Teachers are the ones who will have the responsibility to do that. *Sooner or later some governmental body is going to dictate what technology use in a school means. Sometimes that works out okay, but often decisions are made not by the people who have an intimate working knowledge of how children learn but by policy makers who are far removed from the daily interactions of children in a learning environment* [emphasis added]. I'd much rather take a *proactive stance* [emphasis added] in the integration of technology into my classroom than a reactive one. (L. Stattlemeyer in Routman, 2000, p. 510)

Since the 1980s, many exceptional teachers who masterfully use tried-and-true instructional tools (e.g., chalkboards, textbooks, tablets, pens, pencils, overhead projectors, and videocassette players) have been grappling with the arrival of a newer classroom tool, the computer (Cuban, 2001). During my own quest to integrate computer technologies with the undergraduate and graduate literacy courses I teach at the university level, I have come to realize that most teachers are pragmatic. We recognize that computers are powerful tools for learning; however, we also tend to rely on instructional tools that we believe in and know work well. We simply cannot afford the luxury of wasting precious classroom time on too many false starts and stops when it comes to figuring out how computers are going to fit into our classroom routines and our students' literacy instruction. After observing literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms during ethnographic studies over the last decade, I

am convinced that effective teachers begin successfully integrating computers with the literacy curriculum when those teachers first link them to classroom practices that they believe are valuable and with which they are comfortable.

The purpose of this department is to support educators who want to take a proactive stance when it comes to integrating technology with the literacy curriculum by suggesting practical ways that teachers can productively link classroom computer technologies to tried-and-true practices. The underlying assumption is that teachers would like to spend instructional time on activities that are well grounded in effective pedagogical techniques, that follow straightforward instructional routines, and that are supportive of students' literacy development.

First, I share my rationale for recommending that teachers use computer-related literacy instruction by explaining how my notion of a Zone of Proximal Comfort (ZPC) aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Second, I describe one tried-and-true practice, Morning Message, and explain how conducting a Digital Morning Message (Labbo & Love, 2003) with computer technologies can enhance and amplify students' literacy-learning experiences. Finally, I close by inviting educators to identify and try other computer-enhanced practices with which they are comfortable.

A brief rationale (or, on learning how to dance)

In crafting the phrase Zone of Proximal Comfort, I draw upon the familiarity many educators

have with Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical perspective, the Zone of Proximal Development. I coin this term cautiously but purposefully because doing so is not an attempt to introduce yet more jargon into the literature. Rather, I seek to describe a connection with a concept that is so well embedded in the research and practice of our educational era that it is also a part of teachers' hearts, minds, and practices.

Educational observers and theorists, commenting on the ebb and flow of classroom life, have alluded to notions of grammar and dancing. For example, Tyback and Cuban (1995) used "grammar of schooling" (p. 85) to describe the overt and tacit engineering of cognitive and social work that occurs within a smoothly operating campus system (e.g., the architecture of schools, physical arrangement of classrooms, management of subject-area instruction through discrete chunks of time, monitoring of student behavior). Wells (1999) took a sociocultural perspective on ZPD, using an analogy for learning to dance that is useful in explaining what I mean by a teacher's ZPC.

Dancing...is far older than any individual participant and, although new forms emerge and are, in turn, replaced by still newer, the basic patterns tend to persist.... In learning to dance,...the newcomer is joining an ongoing community of practice.... [A]s the novice takes the first faltering steps, he or she is...guided by the movements of the other dancers.... Before long, however, the novice begins to get a feel for the dance and is soon able to participate on equal terms, both creating new variations that are taken up by others and adapting easily to those that they introduce.

In other words, my notion of ZPC is that teachers who are comfortable with the dance, rhythms, movements, and classroom "music" of selected nontechnology practices can draw upon them for constructive computer innovations in the classroom. For example, I have written elsewhere about computer innovations of tried-and-true activities that create comfortable computer-instructional routines and effective literacy practices. Author's Computer Chair (Labbo, 2004) is a classroom routine for socially crafting and celebrating students' computer-related work (e.g., celebrating multimedia composing, presenting PowerPoint compositions, sharing navigational strategies employed during Internet inquiries, showcasing work, seeking feedback on computer work in progress), and

it is based on the widely adopted writing process activity Author's Chair (Graves, 1983).

Likewise, Digital Language Experience Approach (Labbo, Eakle, & Montero, 2002) amplifies the literacy benefits for children of a traditional Language Experience Approach (Stauffer, 1970) through the use of digital snapshots and creativity software (e.g., Kid Pix or PowerPoint). Digital snapshots taken by the teacher, a teaching assistant, an adult volunteer (Labbo et al., 2002), or by students (Turbill, 2001) provide unique occasions for developing oral and written language by serving as (a) a memory link to a lived experience, enabling young children to recall details; (b) a physical image for children to describe, eliciting children's rich oral language; and (c) a series of captured events, allowing children to clearly sequence or storyboard events. Preliminary data I am collecting in classrooms where teachers are implementing Author's Computer Chair and Digital Language Experience Approach suggests that the activities fall within a teacher's ZPC for several reasons. Rather than experiencing false stops and starts, as is sometimes the case with untried computer activities, teachers consistently integrate computer pedagogical strategies with classroom culture in ways that deeply foster children's development of traditional and new literacies.

From Morning Message to Digital Morning Message (or, innovating the dance)

Morning Message is a daily whole-group writing activity that many early childhood teachers have used to begin each day for well over a decade (Kawakami-Arakaki, Oshiro, & Farran, 1989). This interactive writing and reading routine involves children in an authentic literacy activity that informs them about interesting things that will be happening during the school day. Morning Message also creates occasions for important reading and writing skills ranging from basic print concepts, to composing, to comprehension, to phonics. Thus, children have occasion to recognize or practice directionality, letter names, words, sentences, capitalization, oral language, vocabulary, and so on. While there are many variations of Morning Message, there are also some key activities that

TABLE 1
Basic steps of a Morning Message

1. The teacher, while dictating thoughts aloud, models writing a simple two- to three-sentence message on a large chart tablet placed on an easel for all children to see.
2. Many teachers use a first-sentence pattern, such as "Today is (fill in day of week) the (fill in date, month, year)."
3. A child (leader of the day) may orally contribute news or a comment to be included as a sentence or share the pen by writing known letters or words.
4. Children chorally read the morning message as the teacher or leader of the day points to each word.
5. The leader of the day circles letters or words he or she recognizes.
6. Follow-up activities might involve counting the words, sentences, or letters; asking children what they notice; or making observations (e.g., "I notice that the word *Today* begins with the same letter as Terica's name, *T.../t/.*")

Note. Adapted from www.blocks4reading.com/building_blocks/morning_message.htm

serve as the foundation. Table 1 displays the basic steps involved in a Morning Message.

Digital Morning Message

The following scenario highlights the ease with which one teacher operated within her Zone of Proximal Comfort when conducting a Digital Morning Message. Table 2 displays the basic steps involved in a Digital Morning Message. Teacher and student interactions in Table 2, as well as children's opportunities for traditional and new literacy development, are in italics.

Ms. G settles into a rocking chair next to a classroom computer that's placed in front of the group-time rug. She places the keyboard diagonally on the corner of a small table that holds the computer while she composes the morning message with the help of Joey, the leader of the day. As much as a Big Book ensures that all children can see the text and illustrations of a story, a large monitor, connected to a computer running the creativity software program *Kid Pix*, is displayed prominently so all of the children can see the screen.

The teacher shares the keyboard with Joey as he types an uppercase letter *T*, because it is the first

TABLE 2
Basic steps of a Digital Morning Message

1. The teacher, while dictating thoughts aloud, models writing a simple two- to three-sentence message *keyboarding with creativity software (e.g., Kid Pix) onto a large monitor that all children can see.*
2. Many teachers use a first-sentence pattern, such as "Today is (fill in day of week) the (fill in date, month, year)."
3. A child (leader of the day) may orally contribute news or a comment to be included as a sentence or share the *keyboard* by writing known letters or words.
4. *Children listen as the computer voice synthesizer reads the message aloud;* then they chorally read the morning message as the teacher or leader of the day points to each word.
5. The leader of the day *highlights* letters or words he or she recognizes.
6. Children engage in independent follow-up activities with *printouts in class and at home.*

letter of the first word *Today* in the sentence. "Today is December 3, 2004." Joey looks out the window to check the weather and dictates a sentence while the teacher models using the keyboard to type the message "It is sunny and clear today." Next, Joey dictates a sentence and Ms. G types it: "We have Letter People, Goey." Children observe the letters appearing in left-to-right progression with a return sweep while the teacher types. Ms. G notices that she has made a typo, typing *G* instead of *J* in Joey. She quickly corrects the mistake, noting her keyboarding techniques. Children notice how easy it is to make an on-screen correction with backspace and retyping. Joey selects an appropriate graphic icon of a sun from an electronic stamp pad to place on the screen next to the text.

Children listen as the computer, a voice synthesizer, reads the message aloud. Joey and his classmates are affectively engaged as they laugh when the teacher selects a different computer-synthesized voice to read the message in a singsong way. To help children learn about speech-to-print match, Ms. G demonstrates using the cursor to point to each word as students chorally read the message. Joey guides a choral rereading by using the cursor to point to words. Using highlighting, by holding down the space bar while dragging the cursor over words or letters, the children take a few

minutes to take turns highlighting letters or words they know. Because making corrections is so easy, the children also may suggest editing or revising changes at any time the text is being read aloud.

Ms. G gives each child access to the Morning Message by printing out copies on a classroom printer. Thus, each child can think about what the message means by adding an illustration, engaging in rereadings as an independent activity, or circling individually known letters and words. Children take home their printed copies of Morning Messages as a home-to-school connecting activity. They will read the Morning Message to a parent and have it signed before the next day.

In this instructional routine, Digital Morning Message follows an established pattern of learning and teaching that is well within Ms. G's Zone of Proximal Comfort. She is familiar with Morning Message as an important literacy learning activity; however, she is also equally comfortable with using creativity software, such as Kid Pix. As a result, she can easily use the functions and tools of the program to guide a Digital Morning Message. In this way, a certain degree of instructional and classroom cultural continuity is enjoyed by students and teacher alike. As participants engage in this activity, they have unique occasions for observing and trying out new literacies, such as meaning making with a keyboard and creativity software tools. One of the outcomes of this particular activity is the creation of an artifact—the printed copy of the Digital Morning Message, which is then used by each child in follow-up activities in class and at home.

While it is clear to me that not every tried-and-true practice will lend itself to computer innovations and adaptations, I invite teachers to consider the advantages of beginning with the tried and true and moving into the new. For example, teachers I work with are currently exploring Digital K-W-L, which is based upon Ogle's work (1986). Over time, by initially operating within a Zone of Proximal Comfort, teachers' successful computer-related instructional experiences should lead to self-selected computer transformations of practice. Once equipped with a compendium of reliable computer technology "dance steps" (e.g., familiarity with an effective noncomputer method, familiarity with creativity software, ease of computer tool use, comfort with guiding students in computer-related activities, recognition of enhancements and elaborations), it

is likely that teachers will feel the pull toward the unknown—toward using computers in a new dance of literacy instruction. Computer technologies and new literacies are ever evolving and will continue to challenge and draw us into new notions of what it is to make meaning in a digital environment.

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