Constructing Digital Commonplace Texts in the Classroom

Richard Beach
University of Minnesota

Every summer, a group of middle school students from low-income Minneapolis schools participate in a Social Studies/English summer curriculum as part of the LearningWorks project taught by high school and college students, a joint project between the Minneapolis Public Schools and The Blake School designed to help the middle school students acquire writing, research, critical thinking, and perspective-taking skills (http://www.blakeschool.org/learningworks-home/index.aspx). For one summer, the middle school students are studying three different social movements in recent American history, the 1992 LA Riots, the Stonewall Riots, and Hate Crimes, curriculum taught and organized by high school and college students.

To create their curriculum, Jamiee Bohning, the curriculum coordinator, and the teachers employ a wiki to collaboratively organize their curriculum activities (http://lwguidedresearch.pbworks.com). For the social movements project, students wrote about images, video clips, news articles, and music associated with these events on Google Docs by adopting different points of view of the protesters, police, and bystanders. Students then uploaded these images to an annotation tool, VoiceThread. They then added audio dialogue annotations to describe how the person in the image was experiencing the event, followed by other students adding their own annotations.

Using Digital Commonplace Texts for Collaborative Learning

In this project, teachers and students were collaboratively constructing texts using a wiki to organize their curriculum, Google Docs to share students’ research about the events, and VoiceThread to portray perspectives of images of the events. I refer to these uses of these digital tools—a wiki, Google Docs, and VoiceThread to create *digital commonplace texts*—texts involving collaborative construction of shared knowledge. The idea of “commonplace” derives from the “commonplace book”—a genre in which authors such as Milton, Jefferson, Thoreau, Woolf, and Twain kept commonplace books as scrapbooks by transcribing quotes or keeping annotations as summary and critical reflection on ideas in books. Through sharing their annotations of the same book, readers collaboratively constructed repositories of shared knowledge about topics and issues for later generations.

One limitation of these print commonplace books was that it is often difficult to share annotations with others by writing on print books. Increased classroom use of e-books/tablets, wikis, and photo-sharing/social-networking sites, along with digital annotation tools for annotating websites has to potential to foster the same collaborative construction of knowledge as was the case with the digital commonplace book. For example, students can use the Kindle app to highlight passages in e-books and add annotations that are then marked with a grey underline. They can then select Popular Highlight to determine the number of other readers who have highlighted a particular passage, view Popular Highlights for all books (http://kindle.amazon.com), or export their passages and annotations to sites such as Evernote (http://www.evernote.com). And, with the future growth of digital textbooks such as those produced by the CK-12 Flexbooks used in California in science and mathematics (http://www.ck12.org/flexr), students can upload pdf versions of their textbooks onto iPad using iAnnotate (http://www.ajidev.com/apps.html) for making and sharing annotations. Stephen Johnson (2009) posits that these tools will transform reading and writing:
With books becoming part of this universe, "booklogs" will prosper, with readers taking inspiring or infuriating passages out of books and commenting on them in public….Think of it as a permanent, global book club. As you read, you will know that at any given moment, a conversation is available about the paragraph or even sentence you are reading. Nobody will read alone anymore. Reading books will go from being a fundamentally private activity—a direct exchange between author and reader—to a community event, with every isolated paragraph the launching pad for a conversation with strangers around the world.

Reading and writing digital commonplace texts therefore shifts students’ and teachers’ roles from passively consuming of texts as fixed, autonomous entities to actively and collaboratively constructing knowledge—from top-down, vertical acquisition of information—learning that, to horizontal learning how through “many-to-multitudes” collaboration.

Tools for Constructing Digital Commonplace Texts

There are three basic types of tools for constructing digital commonplace texts: social bookmarking tools such as Diigo or delicious, tools for annotating images or video such as VoiceThread or YouTube Annotations, and collaborative writing tools such as wikis, Google Docs, or online writing sites.

**Social bookmarking tools.** For collaboratively sharing links, tags, and/or annotations to websites, students and teachers can employ social bookmarking/annotation tools such as Diigo (http://www.diigo.com), delicious (http://www.delicious.org), Reframe It (http://reframeit.com), Trailfire (http://trailfire.com/pages/download.php), or Evernote (http://www.evernote.com). Teachers can use Diigo set up special Educator accounts to add students to a class “group” account along with privacy settings (www.diigo.com/education) for sharing of bookmarks of websites relevant to topics or issues of interest to the class. Then, all students in the class can access Diigo to obtain these links; they can also receive emails listing sites that have been bookmarked. For example, students in a science class are studying the impact of the use of oil dispersants on marine life in the Gulf of Mexico following the British Petroleum oil rig explosion. They then search for relevant websites and bookmark those sites for sharing with their peers.

Once students select a site to bookmark, they then add keyword tags to identify topics addressed in a site. To determine which tags to add, students need a clear sense of purpose for identifying relevant tags, for example, tags most relevant to analyzing the effects of oil dispersants on marine life. Acquiring useful tags from other students bolsters students’ belief in the value of collaboration. For example, in studying Julia Alvarez’s novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, a fictionalized account of the lives of the Mirabal sisters, leaders in the Fourteenth of June Movement during the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic, students in Edina High School, Edina, Minnesota, were conducting research on the Mirabel sisters and the Dominican Republic to make presentations to their peers (Author, 2009). Students responded positively to socially sharing tags as helping them organize their resources. When asked to reflect on the use of tags, one student noted, “‘Yes. I do think this would be useful in the classroom because you would find information faster. You can look at other people’s tags and cut your research time in half because its been provided for you’” (p. 37).

Students can then add annotations to any site or blog post to share with their entire class or with subgroups within a class. In using Diigo, they first highlight a section of a text and they add a "sticky note” annotation that pops up when others click on a “sticky note” icon. For example, in a literature class, students can then share their small-group responses to online texts such as poems from the Academy of American Poets (http://www.poets.org) or Poetry Archives
Adding annotations to images and video. Students can also share their annotations to images or videos. One easy-to-use tool for adding annotations to images and video is VoiceThread (http://voicethread.com) in which multiple users share oral or written annotations to the same images or video clips. Students can search for images in Flickr on a topic they are studying and then can automatically import those images directly into VoiceThread. Students, teachers, and parents can then add annotations to the same images or video, providing students with a range of alternative perspectives with which to compare their own annotation. For example, in his 7th grade math class, Bitt Gow shared images of snooker balls, chocolates, sweets, and cards to have students from two different countries provide solutions to probability questions (http://voicethread.com/library/31). And, Amy Cobb, a seventh grade language arts teacher in St. Petersburg, Florida, created a VoiceThread with a map of St. Petersburg and had her students describe what they liked about where they lived (http://voicethread.com/library/10/). By then adding VoiceThread to her class blog (http://writeoutloud.edublogs.org), she provided access to other audiences to view the students’ annotations.

Students can also add annotations to YouTube videos by selecting the “Edit Annotations” to add annotations in the annotations panel to the left of the video viewer, locating the place in the video the annotation references, specifying the duration of the video interval referred to by the annotation, and then publishing to the Web. Students can also use VideoAnt (http://ant.umn.edu) to add annotations at specific places in a video along a timeline; for an example of annotations to a video produced by a group of high school students: http://k12online.ning.com/video/using-videoant-annotations-to?xg_source=activity

Developing effective annotations. In creating their annotations, students often need assistance in going beyond simply restating or summarizing content to formulating their own engagement responses, intertextual connections, interpretations, judgments, or contextualizing material related to their purposes for studying a topic or issue. Teachers can model elaboration of annotations in contributing their own annotations by describing their engagement responses, defining connections to other texts or experiences, formulating alternative interpretations, making aesthetic judgments, or contextualizing the content in terms of how it contributes to a larger topic or issue. Teachers can also model question-asking annotations by using the Critical Response Protocol questions: “What are you noticing?” “What did you see that makes you say that?” “What does it remind you of?” “How do you feel?” “What questions does the ‘text’ raise for you? What did you learn?” (Lerman & Borstel, 2007). And, they can encourage or model responding to each other’s annotations through having them reflect on how their annotations represents a different interpretation than that of their peers, comparisons that fosters perspective-taking (Carbone, 2010).

Students working collaboratively on a project and sharing bookmarks, tags, and annotations associated with that project’s topic are more likely to adopt different perspectives on a topic if they assume different roles and responsibilities. To foster adoption of different perspectives, William Ferriter (2010) assigns his students to six roles related to searching and selecting sites (for descriptions/handouts, see: http://digitallyspeaking.pbworks.com/Social-Bookmarking-and-Annotating#SharedAnnotationsOverview): “The Original Thinker,” who finds and assesses the quality of a range of sites relevant to the topic; “The Reliability Cop,” who detects instances of sites that as suspect or bogus; “The Connector,” who searches for other sites related to secondary themes; “Johnny Opposite,” who searches for sites that reflect a range of alternative perspectives on a topic; “The Mind Reader,” who searches sites tagged by other
Diigo or Delicious users; and “The Cleaning Crew” who checks and edits the language used in creating tags.

Students are better able to define their roles and responsibilities if they have a clear sense of purpose for why they are adding annotations to assist others in achieving that purpose. For example, students in an English class are engaged in an online role-play debate in which they assume different perspectives on the issue of Internet privacy/secrecy. To prepare for the debate they add their annotations to texts on this issue based on the purpose of finding evidence to support their positions in the debate.

**Collaborative writing tools.** A third set of tools for creating digital commonplace texts involves the use of wikis or Google Docs, as illustrated by Jaimee Bohning’s use of these tools for her LearningWorks curriculum development project. Teachers can create class wikis using PBWorks (http://pbworks.com), Wikispaces (http://www.wikispaces.com), or Wetpaint (http://www.wetpaint.com) for students to collaboratively write about topics addressed in a class (Author, 2009). For example, Scott Wertsch, an English teacher at Champlin Park High School, Champlin, Minnesota set up at wiki to have students working in book clubs share their responses to novels (http://wertsch.pbworks.com/Spring-2009-Book-Club-Wiki-Pages). Students can also create a class wikibook, such as the *Rhetoric and Composition* wikibook (http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Rhetoric_and_Composition), a first-year composition textbook created by Matt Barton’s students at St. Cloud State University in which course section can build on students’ previous work as an evolving repository (For examples of some 2,500 wikibooks at Wikibooks: http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Main_Page). Students can also create entries for or revise as entries on *Wikipedia*, the prototypical digital commonplace text.

And, for collaborating constructing essays or reports, students can employ Google Docs (http://docs.google.com), as well as Zoho Writer (http://writer.zoho.com), Adobe Buzzword (http://www.adobe.com/acom/buzzword), or TypeWith.me (http://typewith.me). For example, John Kuglin, a technology consultant who works with the Galileo School of Math and Science, Colorado Springs, Colorado, describes how students in the school used spreadsheets on Google Docs to collaboratively share weather and temperature data in studying changes in weather patterns (Demski, 2010). Kuglin notes how he also uses Google Docs in professional development workshops to have audience members to share their feedback to his presentation in text boxes that is then organized using a spreadsheet, data that then serves to foster discussions after his presentation (Demski, 2010).

Students can also share their fiction writing on sites such as Fanfiction (http://fanfiction.net), Inkpop (HarperCollins: http://www.inkpop.com), Pulse It (Simon & Schuster: http://pulsait.simonandschuster.com), or Wattpad (http://www.wattpad.com) in which other members provide feedback and reviews of their work. And, students can create their own multimedia books that combine texts with images, video, and audio using Sophie (http://www.sophieproject.org) or Bookbuilder (http://bookbuilder.cast.org), multimedia books that are published by Vook (http://vook.com).

As with use of annotation tools, in engaging in collaborative writing using these tools or sites, students need to define their roles and responsibilities. For example, students participating on the Debatepedia wiki site (http://wiki.idebate.org) adopt the roles of advocates who formulate their positions as well as editors who review and revise these position statements. Or, on the FanFiction site writers of fan fiction adopt the roles of both writers and reviewers who provide feedback leading to revisions.

Collaboratively producing these digital commonplace texts provides tangible evidence for students of their ability to generate their own repositories of knowledge for use in their classrooms.
Summary

In summary, students and teachers can use these tools to construct digital commonplace texts for collaboratively constructing knowledge in the classroom. In doing so, they are transforming reading and writing instruction from responding to or writing autonomous texts to collaboratively creating texts as repositories of shared knowledge, as illustrated by a class wikibook. To engage in effective collaborative construction of digital commonplace texts, students need instruction in defining their roles and responsibilities based on a clear sense of purpose for contributing their material. Through producing digital commonplace texts as repositories of knowledge, students and teachers perceive each other as co-constructors of knowledge contributing to a classroom community of learners.

References

Author (2009).