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Pupils Writing for the Internet

Online essays and virtual classrooms as motivating factors

„How can the motivation to write and the quality of what is written be developed?“ This is a problem facing almost any and every teacher, whatever subject they teach. Initial solutions are offered by new theories in education which advocate giving pupils the greatest possible freedom when writing texts. Using the school equipment to print what they have produced gives their work extra importance. Writing texts on computers has led to an improvement in the quality of the products. The following suggestions and examples show how the Internet can substantially improve text writing in a number of ways: through making essays accessible worldwide, and through co-operation between schools from different countries and continents in virtual classrooms.

1. Free texts on the computer

Within the context of pedagogical reforms advocating free choice in the classroom, changes first occurred in primary schools which were then implemented more and more frequently in secondary schools. Pupils were allowed to choose their subject and write about it as they liked; with the result that almost all of them produced qualitatively and quantitatively better texts. To do so, they must be able to decide **what, when, where, how** and **in which language** they write.

Having a free hand in choosing the subject matter – limited only by laws and state curricula and subject to the teacher’s consent – is vitally important. One vital condition which encourages pupils to write is, without doubt, the freedom to choose when and where they wish to do so; be it at school or at home, during free activities, planning stages or

project work. The texts are written in German, with the exception of writing exercises in foreign language lessons. When making notes by hand the traditional writing equipment (pens and paper) is available practically everywhere and at any time.

Even if the handwritten texts are not distributed to the whole class but are only kept in pupils' files, the texts produced in all grades will, as a rule, be longer and richer content-wise, simply due to the principle of free choice.

The French educational reformer, Célestin Freinet, introduced the idea of school printing rooms and thereby exemplified the importance of printed text. Besides putting pupils' written work on the school or classroom pinboard, or creating 'wall newspapers', distributing a copy of a pupil's text to each member of the class – i.e. a class-wide publication – considerably increases pupils' motivation to write.

Aside from the school printing room – the implementation of which is still worthwhile today – computers with word processing programmes have become increasingly prevalent in schools generally. Writing has become technically easier and more effective now that it is possible to correct sentences and to copy whole passages by means of a few mouse clicks.

With the help of graphics, neat and tidy texts can be created and made optically attractive, whereby the layout should not take precedence over the quality of the content. In general, using computers leads to learners - and in particular boys who have difficulty with spelling – producing qualitatively and quantitatively more positive written work.

Copying the texts the pupils have written on the computer, stapling them together to form a book or pamphlet and then distributing these to each member of the class has become a frequent procedure which not only improves the quality of the texts but also, as a rule, increases the motivation to write.

Publishing pupils' written work in the form of a 'newspaper on the wall' or a printed school news magazine, for in-school consumption, can motivate school children, although their freedom to choose a subject is somewhat limited as articles can be refused and topics can be set in advance.

Corresponding with other German school classes or with schools abroad (also on the basis of the Freinet model) can raise the level of motivation substantially as these

activities can be transformed into real-life experiences. The Internet holds a strong fascination for most school children and opens up new possibilities; corresponding by e-mail, for example, can expand and accelerate the exchange of information.

2. Online Essays

Writing articles for the World Wide Web (WWW) achieves the following **aims** (cf.. Meyer 1997):

- Online essays are written for real reasons.
- The WWW is exploited to the full as a source of material of all kinds.
- The intrinsic motivation to write is considerably increased.
- Pupils are encouraged to work and think in a comprehensive, rather than in a purely subject-oriented way.
- Their awareness of differences in quality with regard to the content of an article is heightened.
- The number of people addressed is greatly increased, encompassing a potential worldwide audience.
- Overall pupils' identification with their school is substantially increased.

Creating online articles raises a lot of **problems** :

Technical problems: The most important requirements are, of course, fully functioning internet access points in sufficient number, as well as the basic technical know-how provided by the teacher in charge who acts as webmaster. Pupils with specialised knowledge and their parents often make valuable contributions as experts or function as tutors.

Working Procedure Problems: the process as a whole can be divided into the following three main tasks.

- Firstly, the content has to be structured and the text formulated in detail.
- The text has to be illustrated using pictures and photographs, and graphically designed.
- The finished design with text and pictures must be converted into WWW format using an editor, currently HTLM or JAVA, and put on the net. Sound effects can be added as required.

All three tasks can either be carried out simultaneously by various specialists, or all of the pupils can take full responsibility for them all, carrying them out one after the other. It also

makes sense to combine these two working procedures, thereby fusing some activities into one. If each pupil is to carry out each step in the work process then the technical aspects involved in transforming text etc. into WWW format need to be practised separately before the article itself is created in order not to interrupt the work process itself.

Organisational Problems: Projects can be roughly divided into two categories: those with a particular topic lasting from one day to a week, and those carried out over longer periods, in which a group intends to acquire in-depth knowledge and skills. Besides working groups set up for six months (compulsory working groups) voluntary membership of a temporary club is often the only alternative. Whichever the case, as many different grades/years as possible should be involved as Internet knowledge and skills have, in most cases, nothing to do with the age of the pupils. Boys interested above all in the technical aspects and the challenges involved will generally constitute the majority in such working groups. In order to attract those who are less interested in the technical side, and in particular girls, the choice of subject should be left as open as possible and be centred around current and real-life topics. Occasionally it makes sense to involve the entire class in creating an online presentation of their project results.

Group size: If the editing team is to work effectively, it should not have too many members, about ten to maximum twenty is appropriate. Particular tasks – the technical WWW conversion, for example, are best carried out by small groups consisting of 2 – 3 pupils. In very special cases advanced pupils can take on important individual tasks requiring expertise on their own.

Time shortage: in most cases the time needed to produce an online article is greatly underestimated. Even after the texts, pictures and layout have been completed and could be photocopied for the traditional school magazines, converting the article for the WWW and constructing links often takes half the production time again, particularly in the early stages.

Addressee Problems: Although the number of potential readers of a WWW presentation runs into millions – theoretically – in fact, the total figure of actual readers is considerably lower and can often be ascertained by means of a built-in counter. As the real reading audience is unknown (unlike when corresponding with a partner school), the article must be comprehensible to the general public and, if possible, should also be available in an

English version. Built-in e-mail forms and visitors' books can provide a means of collecting ideas for improving the presentation.

Online essays can be written in the framework of pupils' home pages, school home pages, online school magazines, online material (lesson material, handouts), online correspondence and through co-operation between schools in virtual classrooms.

3. Pupils' Home Pages

On their home pages pupils present or introduce themselves under their own address on the WWW. Increasingly, schools on the net tend to provide pupils who are interested with space for their own home pages in a special section on the school's site, or to integrate appropriate links.

The pupils' freedom is primarily limited by laws and regulated curricula, as they are only given advice by the teachers who are supporting the project and are at liberty to create their home pages pretty much as they like, and they carry the responsibility for what they have created by giving their name to it. A large number of pupils' home pages are produced during project days in an Internet group. The quality and quantity of pupils' home pages varies a lot and are seldom focussed on the text but rather on the technical possibilities in processing images, visual presentation and building in links to personal areas of interest on the WWW. Occasionally animated graphics and sound effects are included.

Home pages created by pupils at the Städtische Realschule Grevenbroich offer a representative overview. They contain personal e-mail addresses and not only the pupil's identity but above all personal hobbies such as pool billiards, or motorcycling (<http://www.realschule.com/top-secret/sweb.htm>).

4. School Home Pages

Schools' home pages are their global 'visiting cards' on the WWW. Whenever a school has its own Internet access an Internet club practically always comes into being with the aim of creating its own home page. Up-dating and expanding this school home page then become the main focus of the school's Internet activities. On the organisational side, almost all Internet clubs begin with a large number of members from all years. Generally only very few girls take part and the boys are interested above all in the technical aspects.

Even when the teachers in charge are highly competent and very active, half of those who joined at the beginning will often have left the Internet club again within a short time. For this reason many Internet clubs accept new members later on and/or only for a limited time. The first Internet schools had relatively simple home pages with a lot of text and not much in the way of graphics or pictures. In the meantime the majority of school home pages have changed. It has become standard practice to scan in at least one photograph of the school. Small animated graphics (often next to the e-mail address) are added and occasionally sound effects, too.

Links to the following headings are among the basic components of a school's home page: school, teachers, pupils, subjects, activities, projects, Internet club, up-coming events, news, history of the school, school sponsoring club, school exchange programmes (partner schools), address, e-mail and visitors' book. The Volksschule Nabburg, for instance, offers a virtual tour of the school, showing the most important facilities (<http://www.sad-online.de/users/vsnabburg/htm/schule/bilder.htm>). The well over 3000 school home pages in German are listed in the practically exhaustive catalogue of school web sites issued by the Humboldt University in Berlin (<http://www.schulweb.de/>). Due to the well-designed search system it is possible to look for schools under various headings; according to region, type of school, town or name. The catalogue of Internet schools is updated daily from Monday to Saturday (<http://www.schulweb.de/statistik.phtml>). It shows that in Germany the majority of home pages belong to high/grammar schools (Gymnasien), half as many come from training colleges (Berfusschulen) and about a quarter of that number are the work of secondary modern schools (Realschulen).

Online competitions offering a great many prizes, (money and non-monetary), are an important incentive for a lot of school-run Internet clubs to update their home page and carry out further technical developments. A noteworthy example of a highly regarded Internet competition for the best online school magazine is the Online Schul-Award 1997/98 run by Klett publishers and the computer magazine 'CHIP' (<http://www.chip.de/News/onlaward.html>). The winners were awarded their own domain name, free Internet access, as well as hard and software worth a total of 15,000 Deutschmark. The top three prizes in both categories went to high schools (Gymnasien) but among the winners of the eight special prizes for original content and outstanding

design were two secondary modern schools (Realschulen) and one comprehensive (Volksschule: a school providing basic primary and secondary education). The report written by the Stadtischen Realschule Grevenbroich entitled "How we got onto the Internet" (<http://www.realschule.com/schule/internet.htm>), an unusual story of how their home page came about, makes very interesting reading.

5. Online School Magazines

School magazines on the Internet combine the idea of the photocopied or printed school magazine with the technical possibilities offered by the WWW. Whilst school home pages are centred around the basic, long-lasting aspects of a school presentation, the online pupils' magazine focusses on their current interests and topics of the moment, e.g. what's on at the cinema, hit charts, pop stars, but also information on the school and the town, occasionally political subjects (local elections). The sections are headed, for example, Computer & Internet, Hobbies, Movies, Creative, Fun, Report, Music, Links. Besides the list of contents there is a masthead and, almost always, a visitors' book and the e-mail addresses of the editing team.

The titles of the pupils' magazines are for the most part either amusing or provocative. The school web (<http://www.schulweb.de/zeitungen.html>) provides an almost complete overview of the – at present – more than 700 German pupils' magazines available on the Internet. Graphic links next to the names of the schools lead directly to the magazines themselves. The majority of online pupils' magazines are from high/grammar schools (Gymnasien). This is because high schools form the major part of Internet schools and because the sixth formers (over sixteens) are more active in contributing here. In the context of distributing tasks, pupils who do not belong to the editing team submit hand- or computer-written manuscripts which are then included and processed for the WWW.

The Realschule „August-Bebel-Schule“ in Boizenburg/Elbe, for example, has 'published' a „Check List on Producing an Article for Pupils' Magazines on the Internet“ (http://home.t-online.de/home/RalfUwe.Dietrich/rud_pa05.htm) which is intended for any pupils from other courses. The **Online-Wettbewerb WEBMAG** organised by STERN magazine is still (until September 1998) offering those interested the chance to look at altogether three issues of 160 hot-off-the-press online pupils' magazines, one after the other. Most of

these are outstanding as regards graphic design, and the viewer/reader can award them points (<http://morgen.stern.de/san/>).

6. Online Material

Besides home pages and school magazines, an increasing number of Internet schools offer the results of their project and club work in the form of online material which can be used freely and free of charge. If pupils are aware that their products are going to be published on the Internet they are, as a rule, considerably more motivated and the quality of their work shows notable improvement. It is very important that the names and, if possible, photographs of the members of the project team are included in the publication.

Together with the list of Internet schools, the ‚Schul-Web‘ offers probably the most comprehensive list of online material for German speaking schools. When searching for material from this list it is easiest to use key words or the interactive timetable for all school subjects (<http://www.schulweb.de/material.html>). If it is known which school offers certain material, then the name of the school can be entered and the online material accessed via graphic links.

Extremely effective material is also produced in the context of corresponding Internet online competitions, such as that shown by the winners of the NRW sponsorship prize **Unterricht online 98** (<http://www.cornelsen.de/Listepreis.htm>).

Learning projects using the Internet as a means of increasing motivation and quality levels are also carried out by whole classes. Having collected material – mainly from the WWW – the texts are transformed using an HTML editor, the most important colour graphics are scanned in and the project material can then be accessed on the Internet. An illustration of this is, for instance, the detailed commentary on the project “Analysing the Balance Sheets of Selected Enterprises” by the entire grade 11 class G 1 at Business School I in Essen (<http://www.k.shuttle./e/ks1essen/Rahmen.htm>).

7. Online Correspondence

An increasing number of schools, most of them secondary, form partnerships with other schools abroad. In Europe this leads in general to correspondence between pupils and to exchange visits between classes. Home pages and online pupils’ magazines can constitute part of the getting-to-know-each-other stage and consolidate it. On the principle

that “Monsieur Freinet would have sent e-mails”, correspondence by e-mail can create many authentic communication processes and is an effective way of making arrangements for future exchange visits (Donath 1996).

As the collaboration develops, the classes participating can not only send news in minutes, but also exchange texts, pictures and sound files as attachments.

In Europe various sponsors provide financial aid for education projects and offer organisational help in finding partner schools.

The European **Comenius Programme** is sponsored in Germany by the Ministry of Culture Conference and offers a wide range of opportunities for co-operating with other schools and for exchange visits within Europe (<http://www.san-ev.de/europa/comenius/>). As preparation and support for these exchange programmes a number of European Educational Projects (EBP) have been created in the framework of the Internet initiative “Schools on the Way to Europe” (<http://www.learnline.nrw.de/Themen/EuroSchulen/index.htm>).

The Realschule (secondary modern school) Wiblingen in Ulm (<http://www.uni-ulm.de/schulen/rs/rsw/pagel0.htm>) for instance, has linked up with three partners in the framework of the Comenius programme, namely: ‘Claremont Fan Court School’ in Esher (England), ‘GTMS (Ganztagsschule)’ in Vienna (Austria) and ‘Istituto Tecnico Statale’ in Torino (Italy). Nevertheless, the Internet can by no means replace real-life visits.

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