

CRAFTING DIGITAL WRITING: COMPOSING TEXTS ACROSS MEDIA AND GENRES - BOOK REVIEW

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Book details:

Crafting Digital Writing Composing Texts Across Media and Genres

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2013, 208 pages

ISBN-13: 978-0325046969 Paperback

£20.44

Introduction

This book opens up a discussion about multiple ways in which technology can help teach writing and provides guidelines for teachers who teach students the craft of digital writing in a classroom. Indeed, Hicks believes that it is teachers' responsibility to incorporate digital writing into their class curriculum and emphasizes the importance of the digital writing process. Hicks tries to familiarize teachers with the principles of digital writing and gives a list of ideas for those who are willing to use technology, particularly digital texts. He investigates how teachers can use digital tools in the classroom and how students produce textual output, through the digital writing process. In addition, he goes further and analytically focuses on the writing practices which are going on with different projects, and later on develops those ideas and perspectives into literacy-rich activities. Hicks provides a general picture of digital writing for teachers on how to consider and evaluate students' digital written output. Through this reflection and evaluation on students' digital writings, teachers can provide better guidance for their writing practices. He focuses on the importance of writing in the technology age, and explores teaching principles for students who create digital writings in this era.

Overview

The book puts a lens on potential advantages of technology and media in interacting with others, telling a story through different media, and making information available to local or global readers. It consists of eight chapters, addressing various topics about digital writing.

Chapter One, “Overview of the Book,” discusses multiple strategies and techniques through which teachers can teach writing with technology. Hicks believes that schools have to analyze how teachers are currently employing digital tools and technology in their classrooms so that the focus remains on literacy-rich activities, and not simply using technology for its own sake. In addition, he suggests that teachers make an inventory of the ways students do digital activities and identify how they speak, read and write during digitally-infused tasks whether inside or outside school. Hicks tries to raise teachers’ knowledge of the effectiveness of digital writing tools in classrooms and also encourages students to actively work with digital media.

Chapter Two, “Author’s Craft, Genre Study, and Digital Writing,” addresses an important issue— of what it means to compose pieces of digital writing—and then persuades both teacher and student to gradually recognize and develop the elements of digital writing that move beyond merely copying, pasting, and publishing texts on websites or blogs. Hicks’ argument is not solely restricted to digital writing. He goes further and explicates different texts that students can use such as narration, argumentation, and description, and meaningfully makes a connection to the Common Core¹. In addition, he highlights the challenges students are grappling with, whether via pen and paper or digital texts.

Chapter Three, “Crafting Web Texts,” presents various types of web-based compositions that students are able to create with digital tools such as computers, tablets, phones, and digital cameras, which are very exhilarating and exciting. Hicks states that students should be granted opportunities to keep in touch with the world through digital media. He highlights a few digital samples such as digital essays and science journals, through which students can produce web-based digital writings. However, he cautions that teachers must ensure that their students write these texts according to their own critical, creative thinking rather than copy others’ works. He also mentions that web-based texts require rich linguistic resources, and digital writers have to carefully attend to content, language, and organization.

¹ The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade.

Chapter Four, “Crafting Presentations,” opens up a critical discussion about why some teachers stand behind the use of the old standby platform of PowerPoint for presentations in their instruction. It even becomes worse when students have to watch other students’ long PowerPoint presentations on a specific topic. In turn, Hicks provides novel alternatives such as using multimedia websites, infographics, and screencasting. Through these digital tools, not only are students keeping up with new technology, but they will also take an active role and be more cooperative in the classroom. Moreover, he adds that it is necessary to teach students how to start collaborating with peers and create interesting, interactive presentations.

“Crafting Audio Texts,” Chapter Five, addresses the issue of teachers providing general support for their students in learning processes, particularly when they are using oral language. In doing so, teachers should raise students’ awareness of the power of their words and communication. Hicks also encourages both native and non-native teachers to have their students record themselves and listen to their own pronunciation and overall tone through podcasting. He introduces podcasting to students as an effective way in which to reflect on and monitor their performance, and highlights that it has received less attention in comparison to other forms of digital writing such as creating presentations, websites, or videos.

“Crafting Video Texts,” Chapter Six, starts by asking this question, “Is video production really a craft under the purview of writing teachers?”, to which Hicks’ answer is “yes.” He points out that while it is a demanding task for students to produce reflective, high-quality video products that appear to be far away from their real work of writing instruction, the connections between composing words and video create unique possibilities. In writing courses, teachers typically prepare the writing curriculum that requires students to produce sentences, paragraphs, and essays and develop them; similarly, with video, students must learn how to use various images, video clips, and sounds to develop a coherent message. To employ digital media in writing courses, he suggests teachers use heuristic “MAPS,” through which readers are invited to look at Mode, Media, Audience, Purpose and Situation. Hicks reiterates this issue in this chapter and he is more concerned that teachers have students so tied to a checklist or rubric that it completely kills their creative capabilities. Additionally, he urges students to attend to the craft of digital writing and focus on their own writing processes. Through using MAPS, students wear a lens to reflect on digital writing.

“Crafting Social Media,” Chapter Seven, discusses how to actively engage students in digital writing and help them share their clear, succinct writings through social media. Hicks states that students keep in close touch with social media these days, and they constantly use

digital tools on a daily basis. Hicks believes that “social media is the telephone for this generation of teens (and, increasingly, adults)” (p. 140). It means that teenagers spend more time posting on social media than talking on the phone with their friends. Therefore, it is the teacher’s responsibility to teach students how to communicate properly when they employ these digital tools. In the end, Hicks provides some implications for how to use microblogging, group text messaging, and social bookmarks.

“Modeling and Mentoring the Digital Writing Process,” Chapter Eight, closely investigates a number of digital writing samples from a specific student and uses them as the basis for teachers to know how to teach purposefully and creatively. He also introduces teachers to some digital tools such as applications and quick guides to websites and provides them with guidelines about how to design digital writing tasks. He asserts that the teachers should not neglect the importance of traditional literacies by encouraging students to produce digital writings, but they have to motivate students to produce more writings. He persuades teachers to have their students do purposeful, deliberate work with both print and digital writing.

Recommendation

This book is a worthy read because it opens up a different perspective for both teachers and students. It ushers the way for teachers to understand their students’ writings in various formats, certainly not substantiated by educational systems. Hicks encourages students to keep thinking, do more deliberate work, be risk takers, recognize their mistakes, and learn from them. Additionally, he discusses different kinds of writing through the processes of learning and creativity, and raises teachers’ awareness of how they can actively involve their students with meaningful, creative, and reflective writing. In the end, he urges composition teachers to develop their notions of writing and use multiple strategies and techniques to teach them.

For more information about the book, including a list of links and resources, visit the companion wiki page at

http://digitalwritingworkshop.wikispaces.com/Crafting_Digital_Writing.