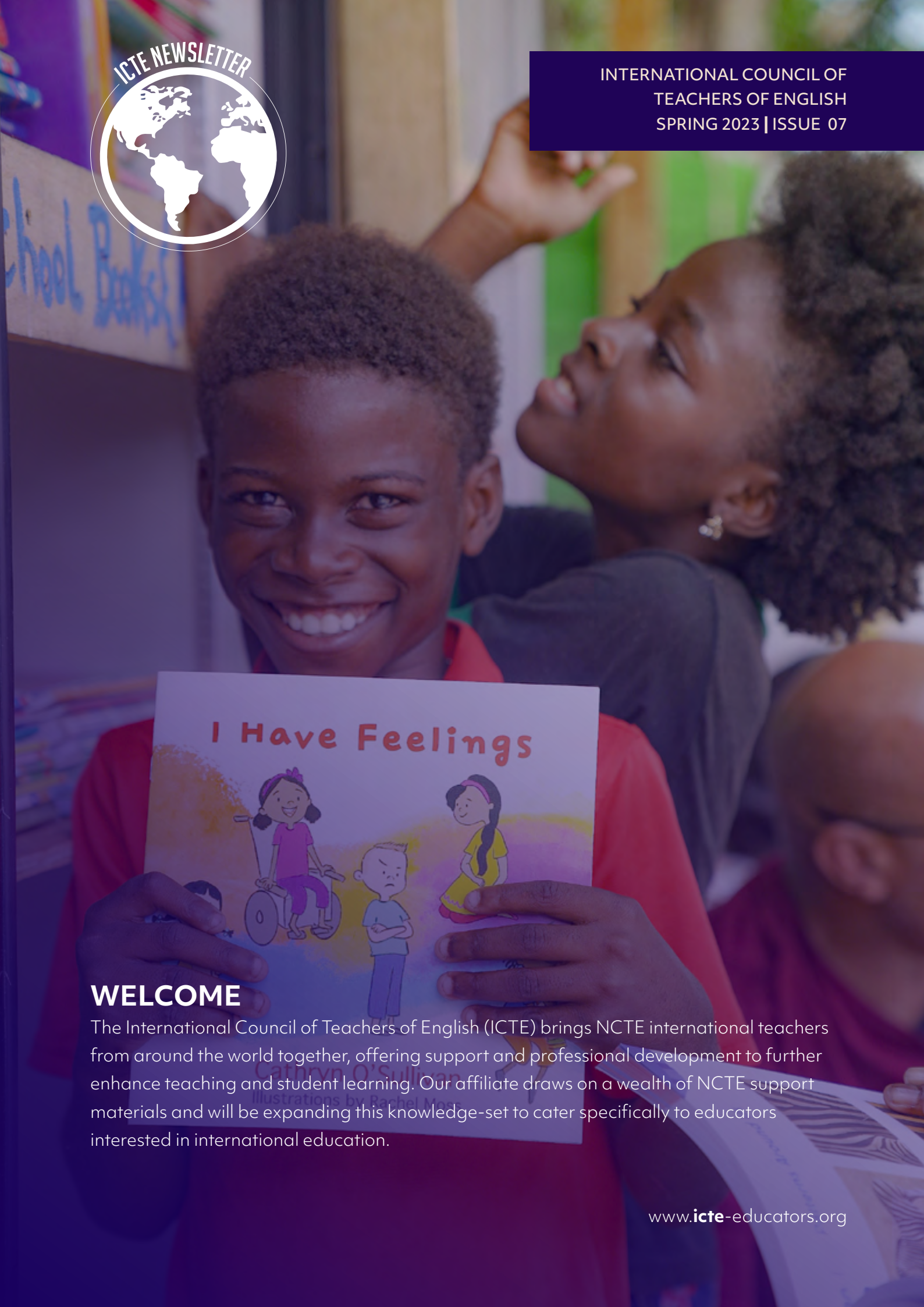

ICTE NEWSLETTER

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WELCOME

The International Council of Teachers of English (ICTE) brings NCTE international teachers from around the world together, offering support and professional development to further enhance teaching and student learning. Our affiliate draws on a wealth of NCTE support materials and will be expanding this knowledge-set to cater specifically to educators interested in international education.

International Council of Teachers of English

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We welcome submissions for our ICTE members stationed around the world! Manuscripts should range in length from 500 to 2,500 words. Please contact us if you would like to submit longer manuscripts. Follow the NCTE guidelines for nonsexist use of language.

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WHAT'S inside

The IB English Guys
An Origin Story

Photo by Javier Miranda on Unsplash

David Giles and Andrew Cohen
IB English Guys
Bangkok, Thailand

It all started with a late-night phone call. I woke up with a start.

"What is it this time, Andrew?"

"Dave, this is it! I know what our project is going to be, what we've been dreaming of creating together."

"Let's hear it."

"There's nothing on YouTube for IB English students. Nada. You and I are going to create YouTube videos with advice on how to master IB English."

"Good night, Andrew."

The next morning, I woke up, realizing my teaching partner and good friend Andrew Cohen was onto something. Little did I know what this phone call would lead to – a collaborative project that would reach students and teachers all over the world and become the most rewarding professional experience of my career. Andrew later told me that his desire stemmed from his experience as an IB examiner listening to kids give their individual oral. "These kids need some help, Dave," Andrew would tell me. "We can help them."

Let me back up a bit. Andrew and I have been teaching IB English courses together for over ten years and our collaboration has evolved to include unit planning, writing exemplars for students, co-teaching, and focusing on the skills to help kids become better writers and thinkers. Thankfully, our school has created a culture and a schedule that has allowed us to flourish as teaching partners. I soon learned with Andrew that collaboration and true team teaching makes both teachers so much better. The days of lone wolf or silo teaching are over for me.

For years Andrew and I had been wanting to create a project or present at a conference or do something creative to share our ideas with other educators and students. It was hard to find the courage or the time, especially considering Andrew's aversion to speaking publicly in front of large groups. It's funny to think that pasting our faces on YouTube would

somehow seem less scary than speaking at a meeting in front of colleagues!

We began our YouTube project with a simple goal – to create short and free videos that broke down the various skills required for one of the more challenging IB English assessments, the individual oral (the IO for short). The day after Andrew's late-night call, I began to write scripts for various videos that I would imagine in my head: Top Ten Tips for the IO; Nuts and Bolts for the IO; How to Structure the IO. It was so fun to think of topics that would help not only our students but also any students that happened to see our channel.

Andrew and I met up in the library's film studio the following Saturday and began filming a series of videos. With all the raw footage and the seemingly insurmountable video editing in front of us, the project seemed doomed. Fortunately, our tech friend Chris Bell suggested we outsource the editing and, after posting the editing job on www.upwork.com, we found John Billy in the Philippines. John Billy took our raw footage and turned our work into something we were proud to put on YouTube.

The IB English Guys were born.

The excitement and energy Andrew and I felt from producing videos continued throughout the year and with each filming, we began to find ways to improve our delivery and improve the content. With some help from Lisa Foran, our meticulous English department colleague, we refined our "scripts" and created clear handouts to accompany each video. Andrew reached out to a website builder, and we soon created a logo to give our project a professional look.

Toward the end of the 2021-22 school year, YouTube analytics suggested that teachers – not students – were making up a significant portion of our viewership. Andrew and I thus began creating materials for teachers to use in their classrooms. We produced "resource packs" for all the IB assessments which included graphic organizers, teaching strategies, and student models with examiner comments. We then created fully developed teaching units for all our non-literary texts with learning objectives, curated materials, skill work, and assessments with student models and examiner comments.

This school year, our IB English Guys project has continued to grow and has enhanced our professional careers in so many ways. Andrew and I have given multiple online workshops where we have shared our ideas and collaborated with teachers from all over the globe. What's more, our own students benefit from our fine-tuned unit plans and our videos and handouts. The project has taught us about taking risks, sharing our work with others, and linking up with specialists like our video editor and website designer. Most of all,

The project has taught us about taking risks, sharing our work with others, and linking up with specialists like our video editor and website designer.

we have shown our students and colleagues that we are willing to take a leap and be creators and learners.

Andrew and I each work to our strengths. Andrew is the idea man, the web

designer, and the visionary. He keeps a working journal with new ideas and the late-night calls have continued with new visions and new plans. I am the writer, the organizer, and the one to answer the questions on YouTube.

Our "work" takes place on weekends and in evenings, but it never feels like work. It's hard to believe that we maintain full time jobs with nearly 100 students each in a very high-powered school. The material we create as IB English Guys, however, compliments and improves our teaching and I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm appreciative of my school for establishing frameworks which support us in our endeavors. I'm appreciative of colleagues like Lisa and Chris for their advice and support along the way. But most of all, I'm appreciative of my friend Andrew and his desire to level the playing field and offer high-quality resources and materials to all IB students who need it.

The next time the phone rings late at night, I'll be sure to pick up.

About the authors

Dave Giles *is an IBDP English Literature and English Language and Literature teacher with nearly 30 years of teaching experience, including eight years as a public school teacher in Seattle and 20 years in international schools. A former Peace Corps Volunteer, Dave has taught in Japan, Tanzania, and China and has worked at International School Bangkok for 11 years. With over 15 years as IB Examiner and Team Leader, Dave is also the co-founder of the popular online website and YouTube channel, IB English Guys. David can be reached at dave@ibenglishguys.com*

Andrew Cohen *has been an IBDP Language and Literature teacher at International School Bangkok for the past 17 years. He delivers workshops for teachers globally and is dedicated to helping educators and students on YouTube for free. In addition to his multiple roles as IB Examiner, he is also the co-founder of the popular online website and YouTube channel, IB English Guys. He has lived in Ohio, Florida, Japan, and now Thailand. Andrew can be reached at andrew@ibenglishguys.com*



The Role of AI in Human-AI Creative Writing for Hong Kong Secondary Students

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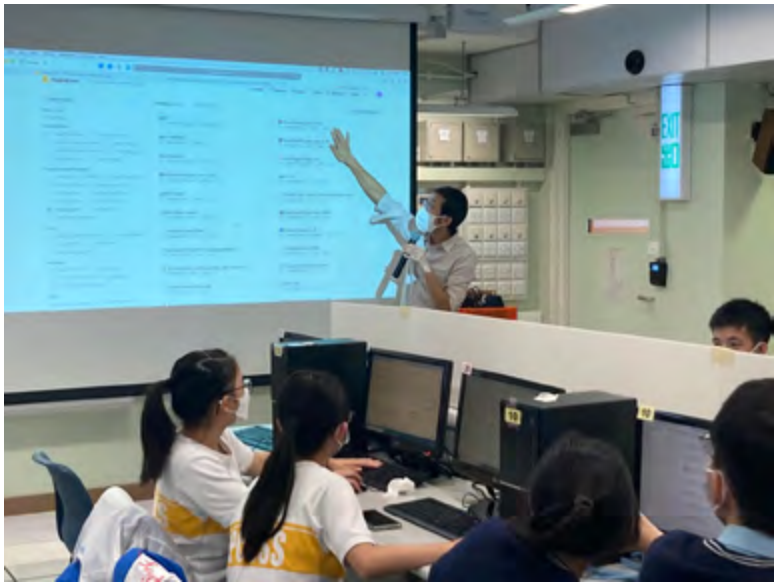
Since the release of ChatGPT, this text generator application with artificial intelligence (AI) capability has taken the world by storm because of its ability to generate human-like text. For this reason, this application has raised many concerns among educators for its capability to facilitate academic dishonesty, such as students using ChatGPT to generate essays for assignments. However, at the same time, we also recognize its potential to be used for good, such as helping non-native English speakers to enhance creative writing in English.

To realize AI's capability to generate human-like text as a learning tool, we first built and prototyped AI-based sentence generator tools using free and open-source Natural Language Processing (NLP) based libraries available for the Python programming language, such as autoregressive language models (Radford et al., 2019) on which ChatGPT is based. In other words, our tools are capable of generating human-like, English language text at word, sentence and paragraph levels.

Importantly, we launched an English language creative writing contest for Hong Kong secondary school students. Prior to the competition, students were given a workshop session to learn about short story writing as well as training on how to use the tools. Then, participating students utilized the tools to facilitate idea generation for their creative writing. Each student wrote a short story using a mix of their own sentences and AI generated sentences together. To help us identify student words and AI words in stories, students color-coded the text, highlighting their own words in red font color and AI words in black. At the end of the competition, we asked the participating students to complete a post-contest survey.

We analyzed students' stories to address if and how the AI-based tools had helped the creative aspect of students in completing their task of writing a short story. To address these questions, we employed a framework comprising four categories of creativity proposed by Kaufman and Beghetto (2009). In this "four C" model: "big C" refers to a level

of creativity leading to extraordinary achievements (for example, winning a Nobel Prize); "pro-C" refers to creativity at a professional level (for example, designer, professional musician, journalist, etc.); "little-C" is everyday creativity (for example, cooking, fixing broken items, etc.) or hobbies; and "mini-C" is creativity that is useful for learning purposes (for example, identifying the rules and constraints of a given domain like math, music, writing, etc.). In our analysis, we focus on the "mini-C" in the context of AI text generator contributions to students' performance in creative writing.



At a fine-grain level, we analyzed the positions where AI-generated sentences were placed within a basic paragraph structure, comprising a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence. This analytical framework gave us specific information of how the AI-generated text had contributed to the student's writing process. For example, the first sentence in a paragraph is often used to state the main idea or topic of the paragraph. Thus, when a student decides to place the generated text in the beginning of a paragraph, this is an indication that the generated text is used to trigger new ideas to build the storyline. At a broader level, we looked at which paragraphs within a story use more AI-generated sentences.

Through analysis of the students' writings from the competition, we observed that many of the students used AI-generated sentences for their opening sentence of the *first* paragraph.

This is an important finding because this indicates the AI text generator was used to give them a quicker or guided head start. Secondly, AI-generated sentences were frequently found in the beginning of a paragraph. For example, in some short stories, a significant number of the paragraphs began with AI-generated sentences. From these observations, we may conclude that students find the tools most useful to trigger new ideas to develop the story further. Our analysis of the post-contest surveys affirmed this conclusion. For example, the students found the tools helpful in providing them with ideas as they were writing their story. In sum, by using the tools to generate text for the beginning of the paragraphs, these students found the tools useful for invoking new ideas or to find

This is an important finding because this indicates the AI text generator was used to give them a quicker or guided head start.

Similarly, some students found the tools to be useful in helping them to locate words that express their thoughts more accurately. Another student said, "First I would think of a single sentence about the writing which is incomplete, then I would put it into the generator and let it do its work." This student used the tools to "find the words which make the writing better."

On the other hand, the AI-based sentence generator tools may play the role of a provocateur, generating ideas which may not be directly or obviously aligned with the original storyline. A student found it challenging to integrate the sentences generated by the tools into her storyline. In the survey, this student wrote, "It's difficult to write with my own words and the AI's words because if you have the story planned, the AI might switch it up a bit, sometimes it might help give you new ideas but I have a strict plan with how I want the story to go…" In this case, the student collaboration with the AI text generator can be an experience of forced association (Osborn, 1963), which is a creative technique pairing random ideas together to provoke novel solutions. This technique is widely practiced to achieve innovative solutions to certain problems.

Similarly, some students found the tools to be useful in helping them to locate words that express their thoughts more accurately.

inspiration to develop the story plot.

Furthermore, we investigated the role(s) of the tools in co-authoring the short story. To realize this, we analyzed the surveys to understand the nature of student interactions with the AI-based tools. We observed that some students only selected the sentence or words that fit their story narrative. These observations suggest that the AI text generator plays the role of a "partner" in helping them generate new ideas and develop the story, which is also an approach to be more creative (Osborn, 1963). One student mentioned in the survey that, "I chose the sentence generator to get ideas…to make my story more interesting." The student explored and "compared which tools would make the writing better."

To conclude, our empirical findings indicate that students can utilize AI-based sentence generator tools like ChatGPT to trigger ideas to further develop a story. They also indicate that different students can utilize the text generator differently in helping them to be more creative in their writing, perhaps depending on the student's English language ability. For some students, the tools are more of a partner, while for other students the tools play the role of a provocateur.

For some students, the tools are more of a partner, while for other students the tools play the role of a provocateur.

These insights are crucial for our future work of using the AI-based sentence generator tools for learning and teaching creative writing. We envision teachers can use these tools to specify the outputs from the language models to fit their teaching objectives and the desired learning outcomes. In other words, the teacher could customize the type and extent of help students get from the language models based on factors such as students' grade level, writing techniques, etc.

Using tools in these ways may alleviate educators' concerns about AI-based sentence generator tools' capability to facilitate academic dishonesty.

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Last Chances

And Getting Ready for the Job Search Next Year

Peter Smyth
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Many of you will be currently relaxing or just coming back from a well-earned break in the teaching calendar. It's an important time to refill your own cup so that you may once more be able to give and serve students through to the end of the school year.

It's an interesting time in late spring, contractually, for many that are wrestling with what they should do in terms of staying or going at their current school. The international recruitment cycle is still very much in full swing and there are lots of fantastic opportunities still available for an August 2023 start. However, deadlines loom in terms of letting a school know if you will be staying or returning in September (on return from the Easter break or May half term being the most common in the UK).

If leaving your current school is a necessity, or inevitable, then it's important to be calm, don't panic and understand that there are still a vast number of roles available in the international school job market. As we approach the last few months of the recruitment cycle, the choice and volume of positions is not the same, but positions are available in a wide variety of schools. You may not have as much choice in terms of region, but there are positions available in good schools and you should apply for all roles that interest you. You can always turn a job down if it's not the right fit for you personally or professionally, but at least you would be in a position to decide about a possible opportunity.

The other option is to focus a little further afield – next year's recruitment cycle – and being ready to secure a position for August 2024. This seems like a long way out, but many schools will start their recruitment and hiring almost as soon as school starts in August. Many leadership roles have already started to be published. Now is an ideal time to get your documents organized and to think about who you will ask for a reference before the end of this school year. Most recruitment platforms will need these references in place for your profile to be active and for schools to be able to access your details.

Is your CV/resume updated? Could it do with a spring clean and update? When did you last ask a trusted friend or colleague to have a look at it? Are there professional growth opportunities you could take part in between now and the end of the school year that will help you grow as an educator? There are lots of little things that could be done now that will make the application process so much easier in the new recruitment cycle, which happens to coincide with the start of a new school year. We all know what the start of a new school year is like, and to have all these little things taken care of will allow you to focus on applying for various roles.

Whatever decision you make, staying or going, there are good opportunities out there in good schools if you are willing and adventurous enough to pursue them.

About the author

Peter Smyth *is a Senior Associate at Search Associates UK South including the areas of London, the South East, the South West, the East of England, and the West Midlands in the United Kingdom. He has taught in international schools in the US, Middle East, Panama and started his teaching journey in the UK. Peter can be reached at psmyth@searchassociates.com.*

A Framework for Writing Rubrics to Support Linguistically Diverse Students

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Adobe Stock Photo

During a recent study we conducted about student perceptions of academic language, Christina taught English to eleventh graders, and when she asked a student why he did not want to edit his draft, he said, "I'll still just be 'Below Basic,' no matter what." "Below Basic" was the lowest score a piece of writing could receive on the writing rubric used in all of the student's classes. Christina has carried that moment with her, concerned that the student thought of the writing rubric label as a referendum on his potential as a writer. Young writers encounter this implicit and explicit messaging in rubrics throughout their schooling career, including terms such as "weakly responds," "fails," "unclear," and "irrelevant". It is easy to imagine how this language would be especially discouraging if used regularly in the classroom to describe students' writing performance. Furthermore, writing feedback practices sometimes position students' work as either sufficient or insufficient using phrases such as "little or no control," which may also detract from students' writing self-efficacy. It is our aim in putting forth this framework to connect writing assessment to a culturally sustaining pedagogical stance and confront school policies and classrooms practices that support a monocultural and monolingual society (Paris 93).

Students' struggles with writing have been well-documented and the number of strugglers is particularly high for language users who learn English at school or use dialectal variants of English that are unfairly perceived to be non-standard (NCES 29). Django Paris and H. Samy Alim have argued that "[f]or too long, scholarship on 'access' and 'equity' has centered implicitly or explicitly around the question of how to get working-class students of color to speak and write more like middle-class White ones" (87). They go on to argue that a culturally sustaining pedagogy would not pursue these same goals and would instead encourage and support language diversity.

Here, we share a question framework for teachers to use in developing writing

rubrics for students that communicate a clear assessment of progress while also valuing language diversity, addressing student agency in writing, and connecting to purposes and audiences for writing. We do not mean to suggest that revising rubrics is a substitute for instruction that stresses the value of language diversity and the purpose of writing, but, instead, to point to rubric design as an explicit starting point from which to backward map into more culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies.

A Brief Overview on Rubrics

It is common for teachers to use rubrics to assess writing in classrooms (Panadero and Jonsson 130; Reddy 3). Rubrics have been shown to help students understand more clearly the criteria by which their writing is being judged (Andrade 8). But the evidence about whether students improve their writing performance because of rubrics is mixed (see Reddy and Andrade 441), with some studies finding improved student performance and others finding no differences in student understanding of performance with and without rubrics (e.g. Andrade and Du 2; McCormick et al. 23; Rezaei and Lovorn 18).

Wise Feedback and Writer Self-Efficacy

Perhaps this lack of consistent success of rubrics to improve student writing or writing self-efficacy is tied more broadly to what research has shown about providing effective feedback. Feedback that is considered "wise" can be more effective at refuting stereotypes for racial minority students and helping students be more motivated to use the feedback they are given (Yeager et. al 810). "Wise" feedback has three components: (1) it conveys critical feedback in relationship to a teacher's high standards, (2) it explicitly addresses a student's ability to meet those high standards, and (3) it provides specific and actionable guidance about how to improve. We argue that "wise" feedback could be used in writing, alongside language that values language diversity, to avoid triggering stereotype-driven mistrust among student writers and make them more likely to use feedback. Thus, developing rubrics is a classroom practice that allows teachers to better communicate students' potential as writers and the value of linguistic variation.

Writing self-efficacy, a factor related to a sense of belonging in a writing community, is defined as a person's belief in how capable that person is of tackling writing tasks effectively and has been hypothesized to include how one perceives mastery of writing, observations of others' writing, messages from others about writing, and physiological states such as stress (Pajares 142). Additionally, students' self-efficacy is a highly influential component in writing engagement and performance, with low efficacy being associated with weaker writing as well as less engagement in writing tasks in school (Bandura 193; Pajares and Johnson 171). These experiences related to developing writing self-efficacy, such as receiving negative feedback, leave strong impressions on writers (Bruning et al. 28). We believe wise feedback alongside linguistically responsive rubrics can help students develop writer self-efficacy.

Linguistically Responsive Rubrics

We have developed, with teachers in professional learning spaces and with preservice teachers in our courses, a framework of questions to use when creating rubrics that emphasize the value of students' language resources and that provide growth-oriented feedback. The aim of the set of questions is to help teachers create rubrics that humanize student writers and convey a belief in their ability to grow.

Question One: *Does the rubric's scale of values for judging responses suggest that students have room to grow?*

The scale of values used to organize groups of students across holistic or analytic rubrics sometimes uses a range of terms to label the work of student writers. Those pieces that do not meet teachers' expectations are commonly labelled with negative terms, such as "unsatisfactory," "below basic," "unacceptable," or "insufficient." Students might read these terms as a statement about their writing potential or even worse, as broader distinctions about their language.

For example, a student from the study referenced in the opening paragraph reported that he had written a persuasive essay about removing Confederate monuments using African American English, which he termed "his authentic voice," and received a poor score on the rubric that had a column titled "Unsatisfactory" and described the weakest category of conventions as follows: "student has limited control of writing conventions." The student described this feedback as embarrassing and interpreted it as a critique of his stylistic choice rather than his use of conventions, saying that he knew he had used "slang," but that he had done so intentionally. He concluded that his teacher must think his "language was bad, and that it probably was," though he had chosen particular syntax purposefully for the voice he hoped to convey. This conclusion from a student could have been avoided.

It is easy to rephrase category descriptors to focus on development that is connected to audience expectations, rather than on correctness, by choosing rubric terms that demonstrate the potential for continued growth. Consider terms such as "still developing," or "area for growth" as category markers to communicate room for growth and can convey miscommunication around teacher expectations (a point we return to in the next step), rather than that students have failed. Given that the student writing about the monuments interpreted negative feedback about conventions as a broader critique of his language, growth language might have led the student to draw different conclusions. Using growth language could transmit some of the wise feedback that we know helps students.

A first step in revising writing rubrics may be to examine the current language used to identify decontextualized language of correctness and then asking, *Does the language of the rubric communicate an arbitrary threshold of correctness or room for growth?*

Question Two: *Do the tools emphasize development and purpose when it comes to language use?*

A second step is to ensure that growth language also connects to purpose and audience expectations, rather than characterizing the language students use as negative or incorrect, especially on the "lower" end of writing scales. A missing component of writing feedback for many students is purpose, as frequently their work is described as right or wrong, rather than achieving or not achieving its communicative purpose. In our own work with high school students, we have asked them why particular conventions of language are used and many have responded that they do not know why people are expected to use particular conventions or how they ensure that conventions demonstrate their purpose and achieve it. By connecting rubric language to purpose, we can help students understand why and how language choices are made and how they impact the reader. So the aforementioned writer might still receive feedback that his use of dialect in his piece was unexpected and that his rationale for doing so was not apparent, but this would be connected to purpose, rather than

inaccurately labeling the choice incorrect. The question of correctness depends on an author's communicative goals, which may differ from an audience's expectations. It is important not to label dialect use as incorrect, even if it is an unexpected experience for the reader. Instead of describing a student's work as showing "limited control," we suggest more supportive phrasing that speaks to the author's agency and potential. We encourage teachers to review rubric feedback language and ask, *Does the rubric provide specific examples of how the piece of writing can further develop?*

Question Three: *Does the rubric feedback connect student language to audience?*

Rubrics may need to be recalibrated to connect to audiences and their expectations. For instance, we might say that a student's sentence use varies in an unexpected way or a student's choice of register aligns with or effectively challenges a potential audience's expectations for that genre. This connection to the relationship between a reader and writer might emphasize that language is a tool we use to communicate, rather than one we use solely to demonstrate arbitrary mastery of dialects and registers that have prestige. When reviewing the rubric feedback, we ask ourselves, *Does the rubric prompt the student to consider the purpose and audience?*

Question Four: *Does the tool explicitly acknowledge that students have agency in choosing which of their language resources to use?*

Finally, assessment tools should communicate to students that they are language users with agency and should treat their decision-making as such. It might be true, at times, that students use particular language features without developing command for those features, but we can still use language that respects their agency and acknowledges that they made decisions about the writing they produced.

A rubric that was more attuned to linguistic diversity could have resulted in a very different experience for the student described above who used African American English intentionally. His feedback might have appreciated his choice to use particular dialectal resources and then have begun a discussion about why he felt his dialect choice was appropriate and how he might have made that rationale clearer to the reader. And the ensuing conversation about improving the work could have refined the student's own goals for his writing voice, rather than implying that his choices about the voice in the writing were "incorrect." The following question can be helpful: *Does my rubric communicate priority to standardized English and, if so, how can I honor students' home language(s) and linguistic variation when appropriate?*

Linguistic Diversity, Writer Agency, and Growth-Oriented Language

Embracing linguistic diversity as a principle of instruction and encouraging students to use and expand their repertoire of language resources, requires the careful interrogation of the detailed ways we discuss student language, including in feedback on their writing. Teachers we have worked with in a range of schools have made adjustments to their rubrics, and they report that, as a result, students seem to approach talking about their writing choices in a way that reflects more agency about making choices. One teacher said she thinks students are more likely to spend time with feedback when it is framed around growth. In doing the work of interrogating our intended and unintended messaging, we can ensure that students do not internalize negative ideas of their language resources that cause them to think of themselves as non-writers.

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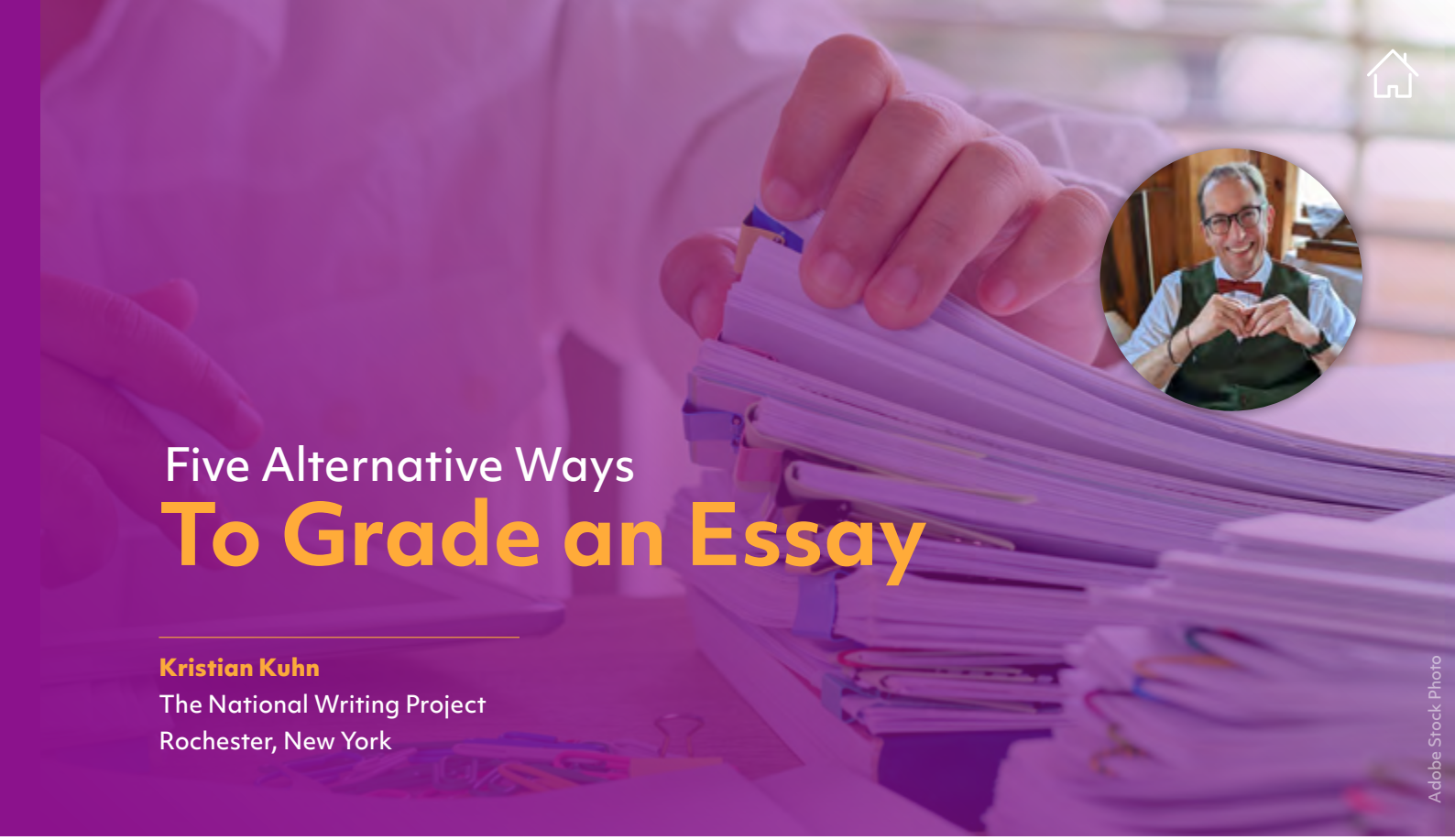

Five Alternative Ways To Grade an Essay

Kristian Kuhn
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I once heard it said that grading a stack of papers is like shoveling smoke for a weekend. And it is true... and we know it – the traditional methods we employ to offer feedback yield very little growth and maturation in our student writers.

So why do we persist and continually bang our heads against the wall?

Why do we insist on being the veritable red-ink hawks that scrawl all of our editorial hen-tracks on our students' papers?

For most of us, we engage with our students' essays as if we were editing the first draft of *Leaves of Grass* with a certain kind of Whitman fervor.

I am certainly guilty of having done this throughout the bulk of my career. On a typical Friday after the last bell had rung, I'd load up my U-Haul truck and head home to hunker in for the weekend to grade the endless heap.

And probably like you, I'd return the essays a few weeks well after the fact – and on the next subsequent draft, see my students make the same errors draft after draft after draft while they witnessed very little growth at all in their abilities to write effectively.

And then I had my eureka moment – there must be a better way... but what new, revolutionary method could I possibly employ to give my life back to myself and to catapult my students forward as writers? What approach would allow my students to inch their way forward to become more competent and adept writers?

So, on a snowy morning, I ignored the papers that taunted me and headed off to the local university library to do some research. I scoured the stacks for something that would confirm my sentiment that traditional grading methods are in fact one of the most futile things we engage in as composition teachers. I looked and looked for some golden nugget that would tell me how to do things

differently. But there was nothing. Not a single word.

And as I continued to research new and different ways to tackle the daunting task of grading, I discovered that there is next to nothing to suggest that our practices are antiquated and ineffective.

But I knew that I was right in my sentiments. How else to explain our compulsory unpaid overtime, slaving our weekends away slothing through papers?

Finally, twenty years into my career and after some paper-grading-induced hair loss, I came up with a variety of alternative methods to change the face of grading within my classroom.

And as I continued to research new and different ways to tackle the daunting task of grading, I discovered that there is next to nothing to suggest that our practices are antiquated and ineffective.

Since this time, I have shared my "epiphanies" with countless teachers, and now I would like to share a few of my ideas with you. Here are five of several approaches I now use to grade my students' essays.

I. Operation… You're the Doctor

Do you remember the Milton Bradley battery-operated game that tests your hand-eye coordination as well as your fine motor skills? You're the doctor and you need to perform "surgery" on a goofy looking patient while not electrocuting yourself. Cavity Sam has a big red lightbulb as a nose, and if your surgical device touches his metal insides… *zap*… you've lost the game.

Well, I have a grading method I call Operation. What I do is perform three surgical procedures on an essay. In other words, I locate the student's three biggest "boo-boos" and focus my attention only on those three areas – then I give some doctorly advice to the student.

So, let's say that the student does not have smooth quote transitions. Like we've probably seen many times in our career – this particular writer comes to a period and ends the sentence – and the first move they make in the next sentence is a quote dump. So, how do we "cure" this malady?

Here's what I might say to this student in the margins of their draft:

"Your quote transitions are very abrupt. How about you place a minimum of five words before a quote to see if you can embed more smoothly so that your writing sounds more conversational? For reference, look at how I do it in the sample paper I wrote for the class. You might also want to look at a couple of your classmates' drafts."

Which brings me to another point. When we write with our students while providing plenty of exemplars and models, it speeds up our grading exponentially. But most importantly, your students will have a clear understanding of your expectations. In your comments, you can guide students to some concrete examples so that they can see firsthand how to go about making edits.

Oftentimes we overburden our students with feedback. In giving them three specific learning targets for revision on their next paper, they have something concrete to work with. By doing this, we can also keep our students accountable. They now have tangible goals – and the expectation is that they will work toward "remedying" these "ailments."

II. Writing Myself the Color of Bob Ross

This workshop method works best if you're grading with a very focused rubric. What I do is provide students with a box of crayons and a printed copy of their essay. In effect, students color code their papers to highlight their strengths and weaknesses as writers.

For example, I might say, "In orange, underline each instance whereby you've used a 'To Be' verb." As we know, excessive "To Be" verb usage yields a passive voice and really holds back the power of the student's diction. Through the process of color coding their essays, they can see exactly how they're doing with regards to this one area.

Or, I might say, "Underline in green each time you directly quoted in your body paragraph." Yet again, they are seeing for themselves whether or not they are providing enough textual support.

And here's the kicker – you can empower your learners by asking them to set their own learning targets at the end of this exercise. In seeing the areas they need to improve upon firsthand, they'll have a better understanding of what they need to work on going forward.

And here's the kicker – you can empower your learners by asking them to set their own learning targets at the end of this exercise.

III. Choose Your Own Adventure

I loved reading Choose Your Own Adventure books as a little kid. For those of you who don't know this series, the books are arranged so that the reader gets to choose the direction the narrative goes. As an example, at the end of a particular cliffhanger moment, the narrator might say something like this: if you want to take Spaceman to the moon, turn to page 38 – if you want to take Spaceman to the Grand Canyon, turn to page 118. And the narrative continues based upon your choice.

Here's another way to empower your learners: prior to submitting their essays, how about they tell you three things they want you to focus on in this particular paper? This works great, especially if you are holding them accountable for the specific learning targets that you spelled out for them in the previous paper.

This method really allows you to home in on the specifics. Everything else, unless it's really intrusive or a big glitch, goes to the wayside. Not only does this put the onus on the learner, but it also can accelerate the process of grading a stack of papers.

IV. 100, 90, 80, 70 Roulette

For this workshop method, I first pre-read all drafts – and on a notepad – I write down the grade I think the student has earned. Next, from the stack, I take four papers – a 100, 90, 80, 70. After I've removed the names from the papers so that the students remain anonymous, as a class we break down each essay to discuss the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Like a lot of workshop seminars, the exercise works best if you are using a very focused rubric.

Using this method, we breakdown all of the components of all four essays while offering constructive feedback. So, as an example, we first begin with the introductory paragraph and explore how each draft gets anchored in a thesis. What's the difference between the 100 and the 90; the 70 and the 80, etc.? In doing this, you can get into whole-class discussions about all of the finer nuances of writing. And perhaps of most importance, students are explicitly seeing the differences in a thirty-point spread. This method unquestionably takes away the "mystery" of why a student is receiving a particular grade. Oftentimes, the grades we assign our students feel very arbitrary to them.

But let's go one step further. Let's put the onus of learning on each student's shoulders.

For example, after we've broken down four introductory paragraphs, I ask students to give themselves some feedback in the margins of their essay. So, I might say, "Of the four essays, how does your introduction stack up? Are you heading toward a 100, 90, 80, or 70?"

But of greatest importance, have your students answer the biggest question: why? In other words, why does your introduction look like the 70?

And you can do this for every trait that is delineated in your rubric. It's important to hold students accountable and to empower them as learners, so I have them write a lot of commentary in the margins. In effect, they are beginning a conversation with me.

After the exercise, I read their comments and respond to them. And if they overlooked something, this is my opportunity to draw their attention to it.

Oftentimes, the grades we assign our students feel very arbitrary to them.

But let's go one step further! Why not have the students grade themselves? They just saw a thorough breakdown of a 100, 90, 80, 70 – they should now have a good sense of where they stand.

The next step is to have my students grade themselves and provide five reasons why they believe they have earned that particular score. Further, I ask my students to give themselves three learning targets that they will focus on in their next draft.

This is super empowering! We need not be the be-all-end-all of grading! We need not be the cruel gods that hover over their every single word!

But keep in mind, I have a grade written down on my notepad. If the student and I are way off, we have a conversation to discuss the discrepancy. But if we are within five points of each other, I'll give them the higher grade.

V. I Sunk Your Battleship (Audio)

You might also remember the classic Milton Bradley game known as Battleship. Battleship is a strategic guessing game for two players. It is played on ruled grids on which each player's fleet of ships is marked. The location of each player's fleet is concealed from the other player. Players alternate turns calling "shots" at the other player's ships, and the objective of the game is to destroy the opponent's fleet.

Again, we are not editing the first draft of *Leaves of Grass*.

And likewise, we also don't want to destroy our students' fleets by being overly condemning of their essays, but we can be critical, and our students can learn to grow from our focused and guided feedback.

For this grading strategy, I home in on the students' biggest liabilities and leave them audio feedback. I have found that providing audio commentary is actually a much more expedient way to offer a critique than writing everything out longhand. To use the battleship analogy, I tell my students what exactly it is they're doing that is sinking their ships. Usually, I only focus on three compositional traits. Anything more than this tends to overburden the student.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, I have worked with many teachers and have shared these methods and many more. You'd be amazed at how often teachers thank me for giving them their weekends and evenings back. We need not do the same thing over and over again even though we all know that it doesn't work. What do they say about this concept and insanity? But of perhaps greater importance, teachers tell me that these approaches allow their students to really grow and flourish as writers. And that's the point of grading – students getting better and making improvement in each of their subsequent drafts.

So, it might be time to throw the old methods out. I hope you do.

Happy teaching and happy grading!

About the author

Kristian Kuhn *calls Rochester, New York homebase, where he has taught secondary ELA for over twenty years for the Rush-Henrietta Central School District – a deeply diverse and welcoming community. In addition to this role, Kristian is also a lead teacher for the National Writing Project. A man with several irons in the fire, Kristian is very active in the social media world where you can find him curating his popular YouTube Channel (Teaching Teachers How to Teach Writing) as well as his Facebook group: Teachers Making Better Writers. An avid paddle boarder and runner, Kristian definitely enjoys the great outdoors. At present, he has authored one textbook, Teaching Teachers How to Teach Writing, and is currently peddling a second textbook to prospective publishers: What If We Taught Composition Like Bob Ross Teaches Painting. Feel free to reach out to Kristian at teachingwritingcoach@gmail.com or visit his webpage at www.teachinghow2write.com to learn more about his PD offerings and consulting gigs.*

What if...?

The Story of Di Cawna Library

Rachael McDonald
The Fundamentals Limited
Kingston, Jamaica

Jamaica is an island in the Caribbean, known for reggae music, in particular that of Bob Marley; home to the fastest man on the planet, Usain Bolt; and internationally envied for its white sand beaches and crystal clear waters. Regrettably this tropical paradise has a murder rate of approximately 43.85 per 100,000 with numerous issues exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic including detrimental academic delays and a myriad of subsequent economic and socio-emotional effects.

In the summer of 2022, I got lost, literally, in the underserved, lower income generating community of Rose Town located in South St. Andrew. There, on the corner of Moore and Duff Streets, I rolled down the car window, and to a group of about five men, asked for directions to my nearby destination. Off I went into my meeting, and on the way out of the community, I stopped at the corner again. This time out of curiosity, in gratitude, and secretly open to exploring possibilities to transform education in this vulnerable space.

The conversations that ensued were exciting, as were the connections with everyone who passed by and hung out on the corner. This authentic give and take felt good and although I was far from home, I felt hungry and satisfied in one.

The street corner was like a pot on a stove, ready and waiting for ingredients to be added, and the residents, hungry for something, stood there watching the pot. I planted myself on a small wooden stand, and we discussed the realities affecting this community of a few hundred people. It was obvious that what was yearned for was something that could elevate a community mentally, emotionally, and eventually financially. What could we cook up?

Throwing the many leftovers into this grand pot of ideas over a few visits, the community members spoke openly of all their problems. Those pertaining to garbage disposal, some that led to clogged nearby waterways, poor parenting, deficiencies in the education system, increased levels of crime and

violence and the implications. To say the residents cleared their refrigerators of all the unwanted remnants of everything that had ever been placed inside for keeping was an understatement. But …

What if… we could inspire hope? Opportunities?

What if… we could do something for all residents: children and adults alike?

What if we could do something impactful?

All eyes remained fixated on the pot, giving it energy and ready to see what menu item would be served.

Could books provide that whole new world of what ifs for a community that was ready for change? Could it really be that simple?

What if… we could repurpose old refrigerators into bookcases with books for everyone: children, their parents, and even the revered "elders" in the community?

Appetites were in sync and all agreed with no hesitation. The fridges would no longer end up in the waterways blocking the flow of water, creating more breeding sites for insects like the mosquitoes that plague the community. And the idea of spreading love and the joy of reading and for literacy seemed addictive.

The pot began to bubble.

And the idea of spreading love and the joy of reading and for literacy seemed addictive.

So, what really happens when you connect a Jamaican with a book through Di Cawna Library?

Firstly, I contacted Wisynco Group Limited, a local drink distributor with many refrigerators. Fortunately they were in the process of discarding old and broken down refrigerators, a costly process with environmental repercussions, and together we worked out an arrangement to use their fridges as our libraries. Then, we launched a book drive and thanks to social media, the donations poured in. There were new and

used books in boxes, bags, on carts, in car trunks, on back seats. We got self-help books, bibles, novels, how to books, kids books, classics, school books, text books, *New York Times* best sellers, locally published and even forgotten titles ready to be placed into the hands, hearts and minds of community members in Rose Town.

The simple act of planning and brainstorming this project and even donating books lifted spirits and satisfied appetites significantly, causing a great amount of feel good energy among many, but especially the males in the community. The same males who are often accused of wreaking havoc in our country, engaging in criminal and violent activities, abandoning their families and being missing in action. These males have been and remain our biggest advocates.

They are involved in the collection of the fridges, palettes, and the delivery. They are also the ones who, on the day before a launch, are out in their numbers, showing support as they paint the walls, install shelving, make markings for hopscotch text-rich activities on the road for all to jump in and on. They are committed to helping with the build out, and even repairs, but also the first ones picking up books, reading them and as is said in Jamaica, "hol-ing a reasoning" about the books (i.e. discussing the titles).

... and the corner transitioned to a place that dished up something tasty even when you were not hungry.

What happened next is that on our first launch day in August 2022, prior to the start of the 2022-2023 school year, the community of Rose Town came out to eat what we had cooked, and so too did the nearby communities of Trench Town (home to the late legend, Bob Marley), Joy Town, Boys Town, Rema and Maxfield. Parents and children saw books that they could read for free. There were textbooks that they couldn't source and/or afford, books they had never seen before with people who looked like them; adults began to read titles that appealed to them and the corner transitioned to a place that dished up something tasty even when you were not hungry. Di Cawna Library facilitates the transfer of knowledge

... and the corner transitioned to a place that dished up something tasty even when you were not hungry.

with belches in the form of smiles and fist bumps amidst conversations that begin to showcase spaces where growth mindsets are actually being tabled as menu items for considerations.

Community members holding books in their hands, exchanging ideas and even hypothesizing about titles; children sounding out words slowly and asking questions; others followed by adults reminding them to pick up a book: these are the sweet and delectable desserts.

In just six months, Di Cawna Library continues to demonstrate the power associated with the phrase, what if. For some, it is an appetizer, as they use books to learn the fundamentals; for others, it is a main course as they find great satisfaction in the power of reading; and it is also a belly full that still a few community members require to prevent them from engaging in activities with lifelong repercussions. With a second library in Montego Bay, St. James, and two additional locations being developed, the plan is to spread to other urban and rural spaces and to partner with more on-the-ground agencies to support and ensure sustainability. There are also plans underway to implement Di Cawna Library in the Zamani Village, outside of Abuja in Nigeria. The year-long calendar of events includes activities that are centered on and around the development of literacy


I Have Feelings
Cathryn O'Sullivan


Di CAWNA
LIBRARY


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LEBRON JAMES
I PROMISE

as a foundational skill, and as such emphasizes Sustainable Development Goal #4. These include and are not limited to:

- Book donations
- Read Aloud sessions
- Story Writing Workshops
- PoeTree sessions
- The I Choose To Be Spelling Bee Challenge for children in grades 4 - 8 with words that represent positivity and success
- Socio-emotional sessions "What I Feel Like Expressing" (WIFLE)
- Partnerships with the local Forestry Department and participation in the National Tree Planting Initiative to plant fruit and ornamental trees
- Stretch & See Yoga for Literacy (for adults & children)
- What If sessions that will see the development of more repurposed fridges this time to support the local economy through fish farming

The what ifs, that have come as a result of human connections and through books are limitless and include opportunities to connect communities with the Global Goals in meaningful and authentic ways. Di Cawna Library has recently been named a Literacy Hero, an inaugural award of the Book Industry Association of Jamaica. I am humbled by the recognition and reminded of the power of literacy to "full yuh belly" (Jamaican for to satisfy your appetite). May this story inspire you to promote literacy in your spaces, and it is my wish that you

swallow at least a spoonful of the joy that I derive from working on the corner with the community members.

"Di cawna" is patois (Jamaican dialect) for "the corner" and the name Di Cawna Library represents the power that our spaces hold in transforming our communities particularly through books.

About the author

Rachael McDonald *is a Jamaican based educator who is passionate about the transfer of knowledge. With a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and a Master of Science in Education, she has pioneered language learning in hands-on and minds-on ways through her schools, Fundaciones. Rachael is currently focused on transforming edu-landscapes through intergenerational and inclusive stakeholder advocacy, engagement and support towards achieving education for sustainable development. She loves talking about the Global Goals, ideating ways to bring these to life and is happy to advocate for climate action education through Take Action Global.*

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Follow along #DiCawnaLibrary on social media platforms using @forthefunja on Instagram.

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Writing into the Maelstrom

Expanding Literacy Through Digital Storytelling

Brett Pierce
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Only a few times in the history of humankind have societies shifted entirely as a result of the introduction of a new medium or communication technology. We are amidst one of those times and this article investigates the new form of writing that is emerging as a result; a writing that needs to be wholly integrated into the classroom, as this technological maelstrom swirls around us.

But let's back up for a beat and provide a moment of context. Way, way, way back, we shifted from an oral culture to a literate culture. The nature of this change is eloquently articulated by Walter Ong, a breakthrough scholar in this realm who had this to say about the emergence of the written word, arguably the first new communication medium beyond the primacy of the voice:

> Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for objectivity in the sense of personal disengagement and distancing. … To live and understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does (Ong 1982).

Those first words – 'writing separates the knower from the known' – are such a simple articulation of this new intellectual space that writing created: a literal space between the brain and an idea. *That* is the revolution of writing. This idea that one could write a thought and leave it behind; walk away from it. The idea that that thought no longer had to be kept alive by an active mind in order to exist. It can sit and percolate as a sequence of written words and then, someone else can come upon it and… add to it. This just scratches at the surface of how writing changed humanity's relationship to self and society.

Fast forward to the start of the twentieth century, and radio, followed by TV, enters into society's mainstream, re-shaping how we spend time and interact; introduces new narrative formats such as the radio drama, the sitcom, and the newscast; and announces the notion of culturally shared experiences: everyone growing up in the 60's and 70's in the US knew Walter Cronkite, ***Bewitched,*** and ***The Jeffersons***; in the UK, ***Coronation Street***

and Benny Hill. The introduction of television and radio dramatically reconfigured the way we think, perceive, interact and understand, and all of this was foreseen in the mid-sixties by Marshall McLuhan, who famously wrote: "For the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or patterns that it introduced into human affairs" (McLuhan 1964).

My translation: communication technologies universally re-program our understanding of self, communities and societies; and the more aware we are of this phenomenon, the better able we are to harness and optimize those changes.

Kaboom! Now we have the Internet, which has, in turn, yielded the many social media platforms of which we are all well aware. (Let's collectively turn our back on AI, the storm- imminent, just for this instant, to stay sane for our moments here together!)

I mention all this not as ground-breaking news, but as a reminder that a) history has proven that the introduction of communication technologies does indeed change how societies evolve; and b) we are currently living through one of those seismic societal maelstroms that used to take hundreds of years – the impact of the printing press, for example – and is now reduced to a matter of a few years.

Inside of this technological tsunami must necessarily come an expanded understanding of literacy – of writing and communicating. Text is no longer the only game in town. Digital storytelling – the 'writing' side of digital literacy (you can call it multi-modal communication, but I find that phrase enervating) – is, I would argue, of equal educational value to text-based writing. Why? Because the digital realm is your students' library. It's their communication platform. It's their social life. It's their source of knowledge. It's their language. It's a full-blown communication spectrum the breadth and depth of which is unprecedented in history.

In fact, has there ever been a more all-consuming and far-reaching literacy; a literacy that invites publication and sharing from all tiers of users, regardless of formal education? Social media has essentially opened up the floodgates to a 'literacy for all' sensibility, removing traditional barriers to 'voice' and its broad publication. This, on many levels, is amazing. The need to teach toward 'writing' fluency in this literacy has never been greater. The question then is this: are we fully acknowledging and systemically integrating this vital form of writing – digital storytelling – into the classroom? The answer is mostly, 'No.'

So, what exactly do I mean by 'digital storytelling?' Digital Storytelling is the capacity to communicate using text, sound, music, and imagery – still and moving. You don't have to use all of these tools, but they are the main components of digital storytelling. If we think of this in terms of primary and secondary colors, then text, sound/music and imagery are your primary colors. Pacing, visual palette, graphics, voice, tone, and genre (comedy, game show, news, mystery, etc.) might be your secondary colors. It's a relatively vast range of tools with which to work in order to effectively communicate. And in that range lies both its complexity and wonder, its challenge and opportunity.

Is it teachable without prior media production knowledge? Yes, it is – this is not at all about yet another new educational orientation designed to disrupt all that you thought you knew. You, the teacher, need to know what you already know: the content. The answer to any question from the students about digital production and IT-related questions is this:

"You figure it out." And they will.

For the students, discovering the various digital mechanics that will allow their stories to leap to life – including cool apps that let letters fly or distort an image to comic effect – is like letting them loose in a playground designed just for them. Except it's digital. And it's deeply instructive.

Discovering the various components of digital literacy is part of the learning experience. These digital components are akin to grammar, parts of speech, and vocabulary in text-based literacy. *Except*… the expertise around the utilization of these elements lies with the students. Teaching you, the educator, what they, the students, have discovered, is a vital part of the learning experience. We all know the power of this flipped classroom model, even in this micro format. But it still takes guts and confidence to yield that control of information and knowledge.

However, the payoff is huge.

One of the many beauties of digital storytelling is the depth of the narrative options at your disposal. There are well over seventy years of television that have yielded myriad narrative forms that can be applied in the classroom. We are talking game shows, sportscasts, reality shows (imagine applying a cooking reality show format to a challenge about student teams creating a Rube Goldberg contraption involving physics), sitcoms, music videos, sketch comedies… the list goes on. Digital Storytelling in the classroom is an invitation to students to utilize their intimate knowledge of television, podcasting, and social media formats to explore curricular content. That is part of the attraction for students – tapping into their practically organic knowledge of these genres of storytelling.

Where it gets really interesting and deeply relevant is inside the streaming world of Vimeo, TikTok, and YouTube. Have you ever thought of these platforms as… libraries? They are. They serve the exact same function as traditional libraries, serving as vital sources of knowledge, content, and entertainment. But since these platforms are libraries of digital stories and not books, their unique qualities have spawned new narrative formats that transcend television. Popular examples include:

- How To/Tutorials – The efficient, visually pithy videos that take the viewer through how to… change a sparkplug, create a survey in Google Forms, or create a killer curry sauce.
- Vlogs – This video blogging format allows individuals to relay personal information and societal observations in a casual style.
- Product Reviews – A subset of vlogs are the product reviews. This format features popular Influencers talking about products that they are trying out, from make-up to shampoo to tech accessories. They can also take the form of a list or "listicle" that ranks their favorite topics in a certain category. Imagine asking students to create a Product Review of… a novel, a current global leader, or your town's recycling commitment.
- ***Crash Course*** Educational Model – This is that quick cutting, highly scripted talking head video format with graphics that aims to take complex educational content and relay it back in a casual, humorous, story-based style. This style stems from the YouTube brand, ***Crash Course***.

All of these different narrative structures champion different storytelling strengths. From the personal journey of the vlog to the focus on voice and sound design in the radio drama; from the variety of perspectives and expertise in the special news cast (think anchor, color commentator, field reporter and interviewee) to the use of comedy to

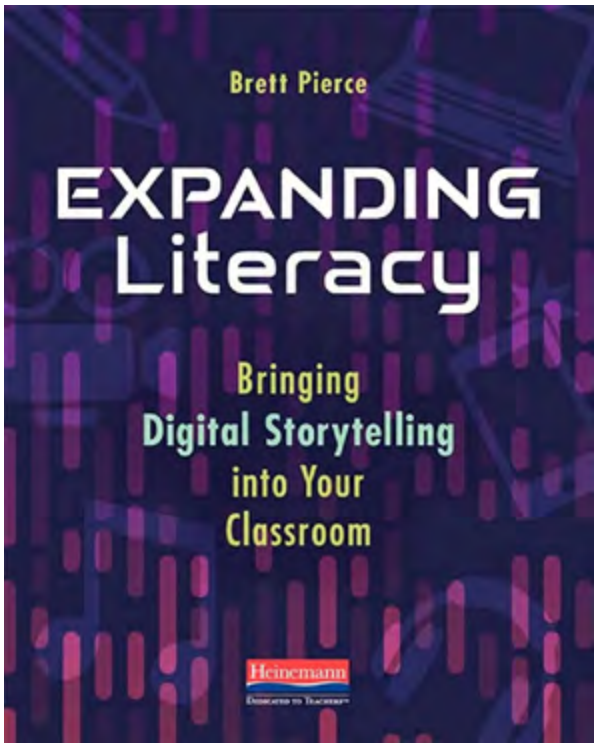
communicate important, visceral content through a satirical lens: the digital story offers students a seemingly infinite series of creative choices that open portals into understanding and communicating serious content, inside of the digital universe in which they spend half of their lives.

In the end, if we are to properly prepare our students for life after secondary school, we need to set them up to succeed digitally; to communicate meaningfully inside the digital landscape of stories; and contribute responsibly to these new libraries of knowledge and information. This means consistently experimenting with the primary components of digital storytelling: text, sound, music, and imagery… which open pathways to such critically important elements such as voice, story, tone, perspective, narrative format, time, pacing and color. And here's the other compelling reason to proactively look for ways to integrate this creative form of communication into your classroom syllabus: to create a good digital story, the students need to research, use evidence-based reasoning, collaborate, create, think critically, problem solve, work iteratively, present publicly, manage time and schedules, make decisions, explore new digital apps, and, in the end, create knowledge at the intersection of both imaginative and practical worlds. The educational value is clear and inexorable.

And – just one more 'and' – for the students… it's a blast!

About the author

Brett Pierce *is the author of* ***Expanding Literacy: Bringing Digital Storytelling into Your Classroom****, (available in digital form here and in print on Amazon) and the Executive Director of Meridian Stories, a Digital Storytelling nonprofit for middle and high schoolers that challenges students to create digital narratives around core curricular goals. Brett has spent much of his professional life at Sesame Workshop in New York City, serving as a Co-Executive Producer on media projects about literacy, math, science, and conflict-resolution for youth around the world. Most recently, Brett led in the development and production of a radio drama –* ***Sawa Shabab*** *– targeting youth in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya about gender equity issues, life skills, and co-existence. Brett has a BA from Kenyon College, and Masters Degrees from Middlebury College (English) and Columbia University (Education) and teaches an annual intensive at Colby College called* **'Digital Storytelling, Literacy, Youth, the Future: A Combustion!'** *Brett can be reached at brett@meridianstories.org.*



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