

**A Case Study of *Writers in Electronic Residence*:
Student and Teacher Experiences**

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Abstract

Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER), an online educational program designed to enhance students' experiences of creative writing, served as a case study of online learning at a mature stage of implementation. Students and teachers at eleven schools using the program were interviewed and their experiences analyzed in order to illuminate the relationship between program attributes and perceived effects. Both students and teachers considered WIER to be highly motivating, and to foster greater reflection and reconsideration in the writing process. Possible reasons for its apparent success as well as its perceived limitations are discussed.

Introduction

As part of the TeleLearning Network of Centres of Excellence program, we have been conducting a research project entitled “National Networks for Learning: Building Collaborative Inquiries,” which is investigating how two national telelearning networks are being implemented in the classroom.^{1 2} Qualitative methods are being employed to illuminate how these initiatives are being adapted and modified in different contexts, how they effect the day to day life of the classroom, and how participation impacts both students and teachers. Some of the specific questions we are addressing include: How do students perceive the innovation, and what effect (if any) does it have on their subject-related knowledge and skills? Does it promote knowledge-building and autonomous learning? Can telelearning networks promote a change in a teacher’s sense of what is possible in the classroom, and of what constitutes good practice?

This paper will address our findings from the first phase of our investigation of one of the two networks being studied – Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER). WIER was chosen for investigation because it is a relatively large network by Canadian standards, involving the participation of some 70 schools in any given year from all areas of the country and students ranging from the junior elementary to the senior high school levels. It is also one of the few projects at a

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mature stage of development, having been in operation for about 6 years now in its present form. WIER uses a network conferencing system – First Class – to link writing and language arts students to Canadian authors, teachers, and each other for the exchange and discussion of original work. The authors, well known figures such as Kevin Major and Susan Musgrave, read student compositions that are sent to them by participating classes and send responses to each student, commenting on their work and sometimes suggesting revisions. The works are typically poems, short stories, or segments of a longer fictional work, which students draft and then submit to their teacher for uploading to the conference. A primary goal of WEIR is to facilitate student engagement in ongoing, reflective discussions about their posted work both in response to the professional writers (mentors) comments and to responses received from other students who have read their stories or poems. To that end, WIER asks teachers not to have students post final versions of compositions but to submit works in progress. WIER has three primary learning objectives: making use of computer and network media to enhance students' creative autonomy and to broaden the scope and shape of classroom experience; helping students to (re)consider the value of revision in the writing process and their role in using language to interpret and understand as well as be understood; and prompting these novice writers to revisit their creative efforts in the light of the ideas that they receive and generate in their conferencing interactions with both author-mentors and their peers.

In order to promote student-student interaction, WIER has a cardinal rule: for every response received, a reply is to be sent both to the respondent (whether that be mentor or student) and to a second student as well, after reading that student's posted work. Works from students at the three divisional levels – junior, middle, and high school – go into separate conferences so students can interact with their age cohort.

A teacher wanting to participate with their class in WEIR needs access to a number of computers for student writing, at least one of which has a modem for connecting to the WIER server at York U. A fee of \$650 is charged for one term of participation by one class-the mentors are paid for their time. Students can submit (“post”) only one story at a time; only when all interaction with the mentor around that story or poem is done can he or she submit a second. However, he or she can read and respond to as many of the works posted by other students as desired (subject of course to the teacher’s approval). Students typically post 3 to 5 pieces a term.

Stories are not uploaded or downloaded from the WIER server directly by students; teachers gather the works to be posted on disk and upload them personally, as there can only be one login at a time to the network. Sometimes a student assistant is used.

Method

Site visits were made to 11 participating schools over 18 months. Structured interviews were conducted with the participating students and teachers at the end of their WIER sessions. The site sample includes schools from different regions of the country as well as classes from different panels (junior, intermediate, and senior). In what follows, the contexts of WIER use at several sites that represent the observed range of implementations are presented.

At Varun High, WIER was used for one term in a grade 11/12 creative writing elective with about 25 students, whom the teacher sees once a week for 75 minutes. It was the teacher’s second year of WIER participation. She chose to

enroll primarily because she felt her students needed exposure to literary evaluation of their work, which she didn't feel she could provide.

At Stelton Elementary, WIER was employed in the context of an enrichment withdrawal program. The teacher had 20 students with her from grades 4 to 6 for one hour a week. It was the teacher's third year of using WIER this way. Students were selected for the class on the basis of their home room teachers' sense of their writing ability and motivation. Her primary reason for enrolling was to increase students' motivation to write.

The teacher at Couldice Junior Secondary taught a grade 9 elective in creative writing 3 hours a week using a writer's workshop pedagogy into which she incorporated WIER for a term. A published author herself, she saw the experience of having others respond to their work as a major hurdle that all writers have to learn to negotiate, and she saw WIER as a likely help with that. It was her second year with WEIR.

At Chamwell P.S., WIER was used by the librarian with the grade 3-5 students from various home rooms. Participation was voluntary. She had 2.5 hours a week scheduled to teach them grammar and she conducted some WIER activities in this period. Students brought stories they had written in class and she would do a second edit of these works and then post them, and later distribute the replies to the home teachers. She has been using WIER one term a year for 3 years.

WIER participation at Central High involved an advanced placement grade 7 English class that was earning a high school English credit over 2 years. Students

were with the teacher for a period a day, and had four of those periods every 14 days in the computer lab for writing.

WIER students at Dunland Senior PS were drawn primarily from an enhanced combined 7 and 8 English class for the gifted. Unlike the other 5 sites mentioned, WIER is used here for two terms every year, January to June. As students stay with the teacher for two years of Language Arts they receive 4 terms of WIER in total. During the winter and spring a full 10 of every 12 periods per week are devoted to writing for and responding to others via WIER. This implementation represents the most intensive use of the WIER program in schools to date. The teacher has been using WIER for 6 years.

Findings

In the analysis that follows, student experiences are examined from two angles. First, we consider the critical role of audience in the development of authentic expression; then we examine how WIER served to foster a reflective stance towards writing through reading and dialogue. We then examine the teachers' perspectives on the program.

Audience and Authenticity

Students were virtually unanimous in their enthusiasm for having mentors respond with comments and suggestions to their posted writing. They placed great value on getting responses from a "real" writer who has published books to his or her credit, someone "who knows what he's talking about." As one sixth grader put it: "Well see they've had publishers look at their work, they've had editors at their work and the editors know what they're talking about...so then it

is better, you know they are really right when they tell you something...You can't be so sure that the teacher really knows."

Most students perceived the mentor's feedback as different from (and more useful than) that given by their teacher, finding it to be more comprehensive and dealing with more fundamental creative issues such as character development, plot structure, or the quality of description. One boy noted that because the response was detailed and personalized "you felt it meant something." But beyond the specifics of the response received, the student-author exchange clearly has a positive impact on students' self esteem that revealed itself indirectly in many student comments. They express surprise and delight that an author would read their work and take it seriously, and often indicate that they work harder at compositions that they intend to post to the authors. A typical remark: "It's kind of a thrill to see what they've written down." They also take great pleasure in receiving comments from their peers in other schools. Peer responses would rarely offer detailed suggestions for improving a draft, but even very general comments along the lines of "I really enjoyed your story. Your character Dave was neat" were highly valued, and students who did not get responses to their work from other students (a common experience) would express strong disappointment. It was very clear that students of all ages thought that both the mentors and their cohorts at other schools constituted an authentic and meaningful audience for their work.

This new audience that WIER brought to their writing was initially an intimidating factor for a minority of students, but this feeling quickly passed. With awareness of the new audience came a greater sense of responsibility for their own expression on the part of most, and a decentering from a self-absorbed perspective. As one boy remarked:

“Before for me it was like writing for myself and once you start sending things out and you get responses and then you think “I am not just writing for myself any more, other people are starting to read what I am saying and I have to think about some of the things I’m doing rather than just write it off.”

The students’ sense of the value of writing as a rewarding vehicle for self expression expanded, as did their confidence in themselves as writers. Asked how she interpreted a response from a mentor, one girl said, “I think it means I could be a writer.” Several of the older students remarked that their WIER work had led them to thinking more about writing as a career. One grade 9 student asked if WIER had changed his interests with respect to writing said: “It has changed, I think. I consider it more actually as an occupation instead of a hobby, because I see the actual opportunities and avenues that are actually there.”

The great majority of the students were convinced that the experience had enhanced their writing ability. Having a real and valued audience moved most of those initially not enthused about writing away from a view of it as just another classroom chore. About three-quarters of them stated that it made writing more enjoyable and interesting; of those that didn’t a good number were already highly motivated writers. More of them begin to pursue writing in their own time. Here are two very typical comments from younger students when asked if they thought WIER had improved their writing:

David: “Yeah, because like at the beginning of September I couldn’t write at all, and now when it’s in June, I just keep on writing whenever I feel like it.”

Andy: "Yeah. (Agreeing). Like one time I woke up in the middle of the night and I had this idea for this poem, and I'm like, I have to write this down, and I wrote it down, and then I wrote a story after it." Two other girls remarked that how their parents were setting up a writing room or area for them in their homes since they were composing so much now.

Teachers saw this change in many of their students and cited shifting perceptions of the value of writing and increased motivation to write as a key benefit of WIER.

Development of A Reflective Stance

Students indicated that the authors' comments on their pieces would often open their eyes to limitations or problems in their work that they had not been aware of. There were times when they would disagree with the writers' remarks, but in the great majority of cases they would see that what the authors had to say "made sense" and that making the recommended revisions greatly improved their composition. Mentors would often offer pointers and tips for students to apply to future work, focusing on such areas as developing richer character descriptions or more realistic dialogue. While only a minority of students (albeit a substantial one) would actually revise the posted story; most claimed that they applied the suggestions consciously to their next creative efforts, monitoring their work more closely to see if the earlier cited weaknesses had been eliminated from the new composition and any suggested new directions incorporated. In the words of one teenager: "You kind of look back at the suggestions in you head, and you say, OK, well she says to me to do this, or try this. So you try to do it in your next story."

When asked, most students felt that getting mentor responses was increasing their ability to view their own efforts with a critical eye. They felt able to see more of the strengths and weaknesses in their work, undertake more revision of later work on their own, and were less likely to assume that the first thing that they put down on paper was perfect. Many of the students also reported that the mentors' comments were a source of new ideas for story forms and plot and character development. All of this suggests that these students are beginning to internalize a more mature set of monitoring and revising skills that should improve their work. It will be interesting to see if the textual analysis we are undertaking which will address the question of whether the students do incorporate these suggestions in their later pieces can offer some corroboration for these self-reports of a more reflective perspective.

The mentors were highly skilled at offering revision ideas and comments in a manner that avoided bruising young egos, even when they were actually being quite critical of a piece of writing. Students appreciated this, and it enabled them to take suggestions in a very mature manner:

"All those responses were really good. Some of them, I didn't understand, pretty much you know they all encouraged my writing a lot, especially the pieces that they didn't like. Susan Musgrave tended to dislike my one piece but she said it was well written despite the fact that she hates it and there was a lot of positive support and then I made a lot of revises, a lot of changes on the stuff from the comments they made."

Occasionally a student complained that they felt slighted when all the mentor said was that they had done a good job. As Kate put it, "It's nice to hear that they

think you are worth telling what's messed up and what's not. It's go generalized if people say 'oh, it's a great story.'"

Ironically, the reading of stories from other schools probably did more to enhance the development of a reflective stance towards one's work on the part of participants than the reading of student responses to that work did. Suggestions from other students were sometimes thought to be lacking in utility, or the respondent would be considered not to have understood what was being conveyed. The majority of student responses either offered no criticism at all or stated that the work in question was confusing. Reading and responding to others' work was seen to be more productive. Students found it highly rewarding for a number of reasons. They liked being able to "see how they stood" relative to other writers, and they mined their peers' efforts for new plot and character ideas. The practice of analyzing and responding to others' writing not only gave students an opportunity to develop reflective skills, it also subtly helped enhance the sense of self as writer, for as one student put it, "it makes you feel like an author yourself." At a more concrete level, careful attention to others' work sometimes led students to notice deficiencies in their own writing: "It forces you to be critical of other peoples' work and then you might notice some mistakes that you have in your own work." Another student comments: "When you read somebody else's your, well this doesn't sound good, and then you look back and think well maybe that doesn't sound good too." This was noted by many of the older students.

Teachers' Perspectives

The teachers interviewed were nearly unanimous in citing a number of perceived consequences of student participation in WIER that they considered highly desirable. These included: a shift in student perceptions of the value of writing

and their increased motivation to write; a greater ability on the part of students to perceive criticism as being constructive and not as a personal affront; an increased tendency to be aware that writing had to be understandable by an audience; and an increased awareness of the necessity of revision to improve the quality of work.

Differences in teachers' perceptions of WIER and its impact emerged most frequently over two issues: the degree to which the use of the WIER program began to change their writing pedagogy, and whether its use developed their capacity to critique student work from a more "literary perspective" (as a result of reading professional authors' responses to student compositions). The teachers typically fell into one of two groups; the first, which might be labeled the "naive" group, initially had little skill in writing analysis or process pedagogy, but came to learn more about writing through the WIER experience. These teachers found that they could transfer analytical perspectives picked up from the WIER authors to their own editing conferences with students; and they also tended to find that WIER led them to a more process-oriented pedagogy due to the greater amount of dialogue around student writing that it fostered.

The second group of teachers were typically teaching creative writing as opposed to language arts classes, and these teachers all used a Writer's Workshop approach to teaching which emphasizes many of the same elements of mature writing practice that WIER is intended to facilitate: the importance of reflection and revision in the writing process, the necessity of addressing a meaningful audience, and so on. These teachers were nearly always writers themselves, whether published or not, and stated that the comments students received from the WIER authors were valuable not because they introduced anything strikingly different from the type of feedback they themselves would

provide, but precisely because these authors validated and reinforced what they were already doing with their students. WIER for them was of significant value because it meshed perfectly with their pre-existent goals and teaching methods.

Limitations and Problematics

Despite their universal praise for its effects, virtually all of the teachers cited a set of concerns about WIER's implementation. By far the biggest issue centred around the limitations of the implementing technology, which placed tremendous time demands on the teachers. All stories and responses had to be uploaded or downloaded from the WIER server individually by the teacher or an assistant, and printed out. It was only because they so greatly valued the benefits they felt the program offered their students that these teachers were willing to put in the extra hours it necessitated. If programs of this type are to expand beyond a self-starting group of early adopters, it will be necessary to reduce the operational drudgery involved in accessing and contributing resources to a central data pool via the Internet.

Other teachers noted a lack of preparation for the tasks involved in participating; they felt that there should be opportunities for an online tutorial or a dry run prior to plunging into "real" participation with their students. The need for provision of technical assistance if WIER was to have any hope of becoming more universally adopted was also cited. Several other issues beyond the scope of this report were also raised. It seems clear that if the apparent potential this form of tele-apprenticeship is to be widely realized, there will have to be greater attention placed on selecting, developing, and training for the use of appropriate telelearning tools.

WIER certainly isn't perfect. Our analysis of student interviews as well as their written work brought to light several problems and limitations of the program. By far the most common complaint from students – expressed with some vehemence – focussed on the perceived failure of peers in other schools to write responses to their posted stories and poems. About 25% of the students who posted never got a single student reply, while a minority would get several responses. This pattern was a natural consequence of the fact that most teachers allowed students free rein in choosing the stories to which they would respond.

Very few extended “online dialogues” of the type desired by WIER’s originators emerged around student writing. Typically once the mentor responded the student would either not reply or would send a “thank-you” type of note, saying he liked the suggestions and would use them next time, thus ending the dialogue. Responses to other students’ comments on their work were nearly always of a similar sort. There was some tendency on the part of some of the teachers to encourage students to get their story “as good as you can get it” before posting, giving it more the aura of a final story than of a work in progress of the kind that WIER requests, and this might have contributed to the summary nature of the dialogues. Students also expressed some aggravation at the delay in getting a response from the mentor – mentors were sometimes overloaded and took a week or more to respond.

Despite these limitations, our analysis of the WIER experience suggests that the program meets many of the criteria called for in what John Willinsky has termed the New Literacy (Willinsky, 1990). By providing an authentic audience for writing, it fosters a literacy that arises from communicative acts rather than private development, and promotes a stronger sense of agency and identity as a writer in students; and through dialogues between student and mentor, it

promotes a decentering, a move away from a naive writing stance to one that considers others' perspectives in critically reflecting on one's own work. What remains to be seen is whether these changes in students are sustained after leaving WIER, and whether they are reflected in the writing itself.

Reference

Willinsky, J. (1990). *The new literacy*. New York: Routledge.