A Class Act: Using Schoology to Encourage Writing in the ELL Classroom

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Abstract

Often international students arrive at Worcester Academy lacking the necessary fluency in English to be successful in the rigorous curriculum that is offered. This can be quite overwhelming and often leads to frustration in these highly motivated students. This paper examines how the use of Schoology, an online classroom management system, can improve the writing skills of these English language learners, help foster self confidence, and finally encourage collaboration with their English-speaking peers in the classroom. During a four-week period, students from three EFL English classes were asked to participate in daily online asynchronous discussions. Since the discussion platform used in Schoology is visually and functionally similar to Facebook, students found it was easy to use and were motivated to be more engaged in the writing process. Timed essays were written before and after the four-week period. The result was that students wrote much longer essays after having participated in online discussions for a number of weeks. Writing, participation, and collaboration are all necessary components for success in the classroom and beyond. Although it is but one tool, the asynchronous discussion forum in Schoology provides an opportunity for English language learners to fully participate whereas they might be reticent in a face-to-face, in-class discussion. This naturally leads to more success and self-confidence as they hone their English-speaking skills.
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Introduction

Worcester Academy is a private, independent, co-ed day and boarding school for grades 6 to 12 and postgraduates in Worcester, Massachusetts. The School’s goal is to provide a real-world education to students and as noted in the Mission Statement: “Worcester Academy exists to instill in its students the desire to learn throughout life, [and] to engage passionately with the world around them.” In order to become engaged, students must learn to communicate both orally and through the written word. To this end, Worcester Academy has embraced technology as a tool to accomplish these goals.

In Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and other Digital Tools, Beach, et al. (2009) posit that using digital tools helps students make the connection between the digital writing they do to communicate informally out of school and the academic writing done to communicate in school. “Using these tools helps students learn crucial composing processes related to improving writing, such as generating, organizing, and mapping material; sharing and brainstorming ideas through online chat; collaboratively constructing and sharing knowledge; and formulating arguments and ideas for online audiences.” (p. 5) Schoology, recently introduced to the Worcester Academy faculty, is one such tool.

Schoology is a web-based course management system that incorporates the social networking format into the academic classroom. It provides teachers with a website to post assignments and materials students may need to access for their courses and provides, among other tools, a portal for communication between teacher and students. As Gaillard (2010) explains “Schoology allows teachers to extend their students’ learning beyond the classroom into the endless possibilities of the digital world. It helps teachers to vary instruction as well as well assignments.” (p. 4) As most students are already familiar with the social networking sites, Schoology provides
opportunities for them to connect their prior knowledge to a new experience making it more meaningful and more engaging.

**Rationale for the Study**

Writing well in English is a necessary skill for all students and one that new international students at Worcester Academy often struggle to hone. Writing is used more today than ever to communicate. Students are not only writing essays but are writing informally on a daily basis using a variety of digital tools such as text messages, e-mail, blogs, and personal web pages. Many students seem to be heavily invested in using this type of communication. As authors Chapman and King (2009) point out, “Educators need to build on this writing mania instead of downplaying these communication shortcuts. However it is essential for students to learn how to apply the standards of writing in formal and informal situations.” (pp. 2-3)

Worcester Academy recently adopted technology as a key part of its mission. It is felt that in order to equip students with the necessary tools to be successful in society, technology must be embraced to enhance student learning. Two years ago Worcester Academy’s Upper School began a one-to-one initiative whereby each student and faculty member has a school-issued laptop computer. As a cornerstone of this initiative, teachers are being encouraged to integrate more technology into their instructional practices and specifically to make use of Schoology, a web-based course management system.

This study will address the need for the new international students to practice their writing on a daily basis and address the need for faculty to couple their pedagogy with technology to improve student writing using digital writing tools such as Schoology.

**Statement of the Problem**

Students at Worcester Academy go through a rigorous application process. Applications, writing samples, and standardized testing are reviewed and an interview is required before a
student is considered for admission. In the case of international students, the interview may take place via telephone or Skype. In spite of these measures every fall a small group of ninth and tenth grade international students arrive at Worcester Academy with varying degrees of proficiency in English. Initial placement testing indicates that some students require additional support. For many of these English Language Learners (ELL) it is their first time away from home and their first exposure of the American culture and educational system.

Grammar classes, EFL Language and Literature classes, and Topics in World Literature and History have all been designed to improve the English language literacy of the newly enrolled international student. The goals are to offer each student the opportunity to develop his/her vocabulary and to improve writing compositions while helping to develop fluency, which will facilitate communication (both oral and written) in a wide range of subjects. Compounding the problem is that although these new international students are highly motivated to move into class with domestic native speakers, they quite often lack self-confidence in their ability to speak and write English. Thus, they are reluctant to participate in class discussions and collaborate with their domestic peers, both of which are important components of all classes and necessary for success in all content areas at this institution.

**Primary Research Questions**

There were three overarching questions that guided this research project. First and most importantly, will the use of Schoology encourage students to write more frequently and be more engaged leading to discernible improvement in their writing? Secondly, will the use of Schoology boost self-confidence and encourage greater student participation in student-to-teacher and peer-to-peer communication? Finally, will the use of Schoology boost self-confidence and encourage greater student participation in student-to-teacher and peer-to-peer communication?
Hypotheses

By using the Schoology discussion forum, which has the look and feel of Facebook, students will reach a comfort level, be encouraged to write freely and more often, gain confidence in their ability to communicate in English, and participate more frequently in class discussions both online and in the classroom ultimately leading to increased collaboration with peers.

Review of the Literature

As Worcester Academy moves into the 21st Century it has been recognized that merely putting computers into the hands of students and faculty does not automatically create change. As a result, faculty are being encouraged to redesign their courses to stimulate collaboration in online learning communities in order to facilitate the development of higher-order thinking skills for life-long learning in a global community. To aid in this transition, Schoology, a classroom management system that blends the advantages of online resources and traditional face-to-face classes, has been introduced.

This literature review explores how the use of technology has moved into the education world over the past decade and has shifted how teaching and learning happen. The research overwhelmingly demonstrates how blogs and online discussions generally enhance instruction in all content areas and more specifically and most recently in ELL writing classes. In addition, there is research that is beginning to emerge that supports the concept of blended learning that enhances both the classroom and online experiences for students. This is still a fairly new area of research, but the available literature supports the hypothesis that the
potential for the combination of online resources and more traditional face-to-face experiences can have limitless possibilities for enhancing instruction and motivating students.

In his paper, *Student perceptions of the impact of online discussion forum participation on learning outcomes*, educator Jennie Jahnke looked at how one secondary school used an online discussion forum to support students in an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program. The main focus of this study was to determine whether the students perceived online collaborative tools as a positive, realistic way to enhance their research skills as they explored topic choices for an extended essay research project.

Thirty-three twelfth-grade students participated in the online discussion forum. From that group seven were interviewed face-to-face for 20 minutes about the process. Prior to answering questions students viewed their archived forum posts. They responded to open-ended questions relating to their participation in the forums, ways in which students supported each other, reflected on the concept of learning communities, and gave suggestions for future forums.

Jahnke reported the themes emerged from these conversations with students included: online interaction with other students and teachers enhanced creativity; learning to build on group knowledge and the importance of being open to the ideas of others; building awareness of self; and finally that an asynchronous learning environment allows for greater reflection, revisiting, and revising than the traditional classroom.

In this small sampling, students demonstrated that they were clearly aware of the opportunities and constraints of the online environment, yet they perceived real value in interacting and supporting each other. While this particular study did not speak directly to the research questions posed, it did support the idea that online discussion forums create an environment in which students feel more self-confident and more aware of their obligations
to contribute, thus leading to more engaged and thoughtful collaboration. Also it further validated the call for educators to be more open to using the new technologies to enhance student-learning opportunities.

In a study entitled *Using Synchronous Online Peer Response Groups in EFL Writing: Revision-Related Discourse* Mei-Ya Liang examined how synchronous online discussion, used as an alternative to face-to-face communication, facilitated peer review at different stages of the writing and revision process. The 12 participants in this group were sophomore students in an EFL writing class at a major university in Taiwan. Prior to participating in the discussion forum, students were coached and then practiced appropriate phrases to use for more effective collaboration. Students were broken into three groups and the data collected and subsequently analyzed were taken from each group’s online chat sessions and blogs. The data were broken into four main revision-related categories (Meaning Negotiation, Content Discussion, Error Correction, and Task Management) and two more categories to accommodate non-revision-related exchanges such as social talk and technical action not directly related to the student writing.

Liang concluded that web technology is a valuable tool for facilitating group interaction and although it may be fun there are many variables in group dynamics that contribute to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these discussions. These findings suggested that in order to achieve the maximum benefit from online peer review writing teachers must model, scaffold, support, and monitor these exchanges.

Professor Wu, Chung Hua University, presented *Using Blogs in an EFL Writing Class* at the 2005 International Conference on TEFL and Applied Linguistics. At the time, blogging was still in its infancy but was beginning to gain more attention in the world of education as a viable tool for enhancing English language learning. The objectives of this paper were to give
instructions on setting up personal blogs, to discuss the advantages of using blogs in EFL writing classes, to report on student reaction to blogging, and finally to suggest further research.

Two groups of freshman Engineering and English majors, 51 total, participated in the study that proved to be quite disappointing because most students reported few postings due to lack of time, interest, and computer expertise. On the other hand, the researcher was encouraged by the positive feedback received from the survey where students responded that they thought blogging would be useful. In spite of the gap between belief and action, Wu concluded that: “With a well-organized instructional design, a blog definitely is a plus to English teachers.” (2004, p. 430)

This somewhat dated presentation served as a great contrast to where the world of blogging was in 2004, something novel used primarily by computer-savvy people, to a tool that is now recognized as commonplace. Blogs can be set up and used by anyone with access to a computer and the Internet. Now with web-based classroom management systems such as Schoology some of the problems addressed in this presentation have been solved. For example, blog-like online discussion forums are easily set up, accessed by students, and monitored by teachers. There are also platforms for teachers to post information, links, photos, and videos for further student exploration.

In Developing Writing Fluency and Lexical Complexity with Blogs results were presented from a seven-day intensive CALL-based (Computer Aided Language Learning) EFL program. The 21 participants, seniors at a four-year private university in western Japan, were described as low-performing unmotivated, English-language learners. Among a variety of tasks, students were required to post messages to each other on a class blog every morning during 20-minute timed sessions. By comparing the number of words and word frequency level at
the beginning and end of the program, researchers Fellner and Apple reported tremendous gains in writing fluency over a very short period of time: “They more than tripled their writing output, while at the same improving their lexical frequency levels.” (2006, p.15)

The researchers explained their choice of students’ blogs for a CALL task selection because it provided students with real learning opportunities since blogs require reading skills as well as writing. In addition, the use of blogs fit with student interest. Using blogs, students were required to write clearly so that classmates would understand. Blogs also provided opportunities for students to acquire and use new vocabulary and computer skills; and blogs were a practical, fresh, and appealing approach to language learning. Finally, researchers chose blogging because it provided them with a timely and efficient method for evaluating improvements in writing fluency.

For the sake of their study, Fellner and Apple narrowly defined fluency in writing by the number of words and frequency in a specified time frame. Spelling, punctuation, and content were not considered as long as the writer’s meaning was clear to the reader. The researchers acknowledged the limitations of their study, but concluded that using blogs encouraged these unmotivated ELL students to express more complex thoughts and ideas in English.

In *The Application of Blogs in English Writing* published in the Journal of Cambridge Studies, Professor Zhang begins with the observation that although commercially available blogging tools have been around for over ten years now (2009, p.65) there is very little research on the use of blogs in English language classes. The focus of this paper, then, was to explore the use of blogs as a learning tool in a blended learning environment. It was divided into five parts that include an introduction, general observations about blogs, its use for English language writing, reflections, and a conclusion.
The author’s clearly stated observations about blogs help lay the groundwork for its natural application in education, in that the learning experience is enriched and “deep learning” (p.66) occurs as students are encouraged to research and synthesize. The author posited that this was especially true in the ELL classroom. Although presenting their thoughts and ideas in English, the ELL student tended to continue to write in the style of their first language. Further, the use of blogs and other tools readily available on the Internet seemed to help those students make the leap to writing in the style of an English speaker. Blogs helped students improve the quality of their writing through awareness of audience and the ability to add visuals and links. Blogs also encouraged further exploration and gave purpose to writing. In addition, Zhang pointed out that blogs encourage reflective writing, evaluation, planning, and revision. Finally, the author concluded that blogs are not only a teaching tool but also a useful and effective strategy in the ELL classroom.

In his short article, *Writing for Real Purpose*, Professor Ikpeze from John Fisher College in Rochester, New York discussed how one fifth-grade teacher enhanced a literature lesson by adding an online discussion to his more traditional classroom dialogue. Using Nicenet (www.nicenet.org), a free online classroom assistant that is a cross between a wiki and a blog, the teacher created discussion threads. He then posted prompts to which the students were invited to respond at their convenience within a specific time frame. Discussion questions required students to explore themes and characters, form opinions, and prompted them to make connections to their own lives. In addition, students were encouraged to use this forum to ask their own questions, clear up confusion, and express opinions. What resulted was a tremendous increase in reading and writing as shown by the number of discussion threads and student-initiated discussions. Students were motivated and engaged because they were writing for a real purpose and a real audience of their peers and not just a teacher. This
activity is an example of how technology can be a tool to empower students to take ownership of their own learning and to give them a voice. Though not a full-blown study, this article was informative because it supports the hypothesis of this action research. It demonstrated how the use of online discussion tools increases student participation in classroom discussions, promotes and facilitates questioning, and motivates students to be more engaged.

The focus of *Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education*, published in 2003, is a discussion of the impact and implications for blended learning in higher education. Garrison and Kanuka described blended learning as simple and complex. In its simplest form they defined it as "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experience with online learning experiences." (p. 96) However, they went on to describe the challenges and complexities of implementing a blended learning environment, including limitless design possibilities and applications. They stressed that blended learning is not just adding technology to an existing approach or method. It is a reorganization of the teaching and learning interaction; and they added that no two designs are alike. This, then, is what makes the blended learning design complex. As a way to navigate these complexities, the authors posit that blended learning facilitates an environment for open dialogue, debate, negotiation, and agreement. They have created a model called a “community of inquiry” illustrating how blended learning should be structured. Whether face-to-face or online, a community of inquiry must consist of three elements: “cognitive, social, and teaching presence” (p. 97) in order to provide a meaningful educational experience. Using this model Garrison and Kanuka detailed how institutions of higher learning can make the shift to a blended learning environment. They recommended that the shift begin at the administrative level including policy, planning, providing resources, and scheduling of courses. Then they advocated following with support for both the students and the teaching faculty. Finally, they
explored the inherent organizational and leadership challenges and offered suggestions for a successful transition to a blended learning model.

In closing, the authors urged institutions not only to begin to explore the use of blended learning but also to constantly monitor and assess its effectiveness in student achievement. Elements such as learning outcomes as well as student satisfaction, retention, and achievement should be tracked and evaluated. This is still good advice today for institutions of learning at every level, as they begin to examine their curricula and move to classroom management systems such as Schoology that encourage and facilitate a blended learning environment.

Defining blended learning as the “integration of face-to-face teaching and learning methods with on-line approaches,” (p. 705) Professor Klimova, in *Blended Learning*, posits that the most common reason for creating a blended learning environment is that it combines the best of both worlds. In this paper he reiterated why blended learning should be adopted, why it is particularly suited for language courses, and finally discussed an experimental writing course at the University of Hradec Kralove in which students were exposed to blended learning.

The course entitled *Academic Writing* was a one-semester course that guided students through the writing process. The goal was not only to address their lack of formal writing in the English Language but also to focus on features that were different in English and Czech in order to enhance their professional writing. The blended learning course was structured so that the 12 students wrote and discussed assignments online and met face-to-face with the teacher for individual writing conferences. At the end of the courses students were surveyed. The results indicated that students were quite satisfied with the overall structure of the course. They appreciated and were motivated by the online features that offered them the ability to access material and discussions anytime, anywhere.
Klimova concluded from this small sampling during a summer semester that blended learning does provide opportunities to improve the quality of both teaching and learning. He cautioned that technology should not lead but should be combined with traditional methods to enhance the possibilities for learning.

The article *Online Discussions for Blended Learning* examined best practices for creating and maintaining an online discussion board. It is based on the premise that asynchronous exchanges online can be just as beneficial, if not more beneficial to students than traditional in-class discussions. In the online environment students can thoughtfully add to the conversation and consider classmate responses, which often does not happen during exchanges in the classroom.

These Sacramento State suggestions were based on Garrison’s “Community of Inquiry” model. Examples of essential questions, techniques for creating topics and tech help, and survival techniques were listed and illustrated for each of element (cognitive, social, and teaching presence) of Garrison's model. It is a concise and clearly stated manual that shows educators how to bring the “Community of Inquiry” model from theory into practice. It is loaded with practical strategies for teachers from the introduction and discussion guidelines phase through to the grading process. In addition, tips for managing large classes are included.

In his paper, *Blended Learning: Convergence of Online and Face-to-Face Education*, John Watson of Evergreen Consulting Associates posits that blended learning is becoming an increasingly more important part of elementary and secondary education and is likely to emerge “as the predominant model of the future.” (2008, p.4) He traced the growth of distance learning programs (correspondence classes to online programs) and during the same period the increased use of Internet-based resources in the classroom to illustrate that they have now converged into a blended learning experience. By looking at a sampling of outstanding
schools throughout the country he demonstrated how blended learning established the balance between fully online curricula and fully face-to-face (no online presence) instruction. He explored how the blended learning experience helps to engage students and to enhance their academic success.

Although many K-12 schools are already exploring the use of blended learning in their curricula, Watson contends that this type of instruction is still in the beginning stages. As many other researchers have discussed, the use of computers and on-line learning is not just a matter of adding computers to a classroom, but it represents and requires a whole shift in looking at how students learn.

Higher education institutions are already recognizing and acting on the trends in technology as shown by the amount of literature that is available on the subject. Watson's paper from the Promising Practice in Online Learning series was an interesting addition to the literature review in that it demonstrated how the effectiveness of blended learning is now being discussed, explored, and implemented in the K-12 environment.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study was designed to take place over a four-week period. Students were asked to complete surveys both prior to and following the study. These surveys were used to gauge student attitudes toward writing in general and more specifically their own writing in English. During the first week of the study students used pen and paper to complete a timed-writing exercise. Throughout the course of the study students were directed to participate in online discussions using the Schoology discussion forum. Prompts were posted five days per week. Students posted their thoughts and were then encouraged to read and respond to comments
made by their peers. Students participated in these discussions outside the class period.
Following the four-week study period students again participated in a timed-writing exercise, this time using their computers.

Data Collection Plan

Three EFL classes were used in collecting data for this research project. The pre- and post-study student survey produced data that measured students' exposure to online writing prior to using Schoology, students' perception of writing production, confidence about writing, and attitudes about sharing, collaboration, and the peer review process. Writing production (word count) data were collected, compared, and analyzed from both the pre- and post-study timed-writing samples. In addition the observation notes were analyzed to measure students' level of engagement and comfort while writing. During the four-week study, classes were conducted as usual with an additional requirement that students log in to the Schoology discussion forum between classes and answer prompts relating to the topic being studied. Using the analytics embedded in Schoology, graphs of user activity were generated. In addition there was the ability to drill down into specific content and users as well as collect data on each student's number of views, posts, and time of production. In other words, understand where students spend their time in Schoology discussions, what time of day, and which topics created the most interest. Although not part of the Schoology analytics, data on word count for each student was generated.

Sample Selection

The respondent group included 13 freshman and sophomore international students who are currently enrolled in EFL Language/Literature courses and the Topics in World Literature course. These students from Japan, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Mexico, and Ecuador are all new to the United States and the American education system. Their English-speaking ability
levels span from high beginner/low intermediate to high intermediate. In addition to these English classes they are also enrolled in science, math, history, and arts classes.

**Instruments**

Surveys, pre- and post-study were delivered online through SurveyMonkey.com. This format was chosen because it is used quite frequently on campus for such things as course evaluations and feedback on book talks and workshops. The students are adept at navigating the site and are comfortable that their answers are being kept confidential. Writing samples were taken both before and after the four-week study. The timed essay prior to the study was written using the conventional “paper and pen” form. The post-study writing sample was written using the computer. The essays were then compared using word count as a criterion. An informal journal in the form of field notes was kept by the researcher to record the level of student engagement during the two sessions in which the students are working on the writing samples. Body language indicating stress levels such as nervous activity was observed, as well as the level of focus. Finally, Schoology discussion analytics tracked the number of posts each student made throughout the study as well as the number of views and the time of day that the students participated in discussions.

**Results**

**Findings**

The research began with an anonymous survey to gauge students’ attitudes toward the writing process in general and more specifically their attitudes toward writing essays in the traditional manner, that is, by hand using paper and pencil, and writing essays using a computer. (See Appendix) Then students were given a writing prompt and asked to write an in-class timed essay using paper and pencil. Students were observed as they wrote and notes were made regarding focus.
Classes were conducted as usual the next four weeks with an additional requirement. At least five times per week and usually over the weekend students were asked to log in to the Schoology discussion forum and write a response to a prompt. Often they were asked to read responses from classmates and respond with comments or questions, thus creating a discussion thread. At the end of the fourth week students were again given a writing prompt and asked to write another in-class timed essay. For this essay, however, they were required to use their computers.

Nine of twelve students responded to the survey. Six students reported that they write in their spare time while three indicated that they rarely or never write in their spare time. (See Figure A-1.)

![Figure A-1: Choosing to Write in Spare Time](image)

All but one student reported that he or she was a fair to excellent writer. When given a writing prompt, none reported being uncomfortable and two-thirds of the students felt that they generally wrote more than others. Although two-thirds of the students felt that they had more experience writing by hand than on the computer, they were split on their preference. One-third of the students indicated that they preferred writing on paper by hand, one-third preferred typing on a computer, and finally one-third reported no preference. (See Figures A-2 and A-3.)
Figure A-2: Writing Method Experience – Hand v. Computer

Figure A-3: Writing Method Preference
In terms of their focus, students reported what seems to be conflicting information. When asked if it was easier to stay focused when using a computer to write, seven of the nine students reported agreement to strong agreement. At the same time all nine students reported that it was easier to stay focused when writing by hand on paper. (See Figures A-4 and A-5.)

Finally the survey revealed that all but one student is comfortable sharing their writing with others and all were comfortable with the peer-review process.

Analytics from the Schoology discussions track “hit” activity for one month in each of the three classes, Topics in World Literature, EFL Literature, and EFL Language. These analytics only track how many times a discussion forum was viewed. It does not indicate whether or not a comment was posted. (See Figures B-1, B-2, B-3.) What this seems to indicate is a level of more interest in certain discussions than others.
The word counts for the Schoology discussions each week were collected and tabulated. The count revealed very similar numbers with the lowest, Week Three, at 5,700 words as compared to the highest, Week Four, at 6,113 words. (See Figure B-4.) Week Five is included because of the much larger number of words written even though students had travelled back to their homes literally all over the world for Spring Break. A discussion forum was created, however students were not required to participate. In Week Five during their free time, students wrote almost 55% more words than Week Four, which was their top week during the research period.
The results of timed writing were quite conclusive. In the same 30-minute time frame students wrote more words in answer to a prompt using the computer keyboard than they did using the traditional paper and pencil. Counts changed from a low of 148 words in the traditional pencil and paper essay to a high of 352 words in the essay written on the computer. The rate-of-change percentage ranged from 38% to 123%. (See Figures C-1 and C-2.)
Figure C-1  Word Count Comparison

Figure C-2  Percentage of Increase in the Word Count between Essays
Discussion

Overall the results of the survey were inconclusive, yet upon further evaluation these results may mirror the world we live in today. Most students reported that they sometimes write in their spare time and some reported never doing so, yet they are observed constantly typing away on Facebook and other social networking sites, texting, and emailing. Students today are writing more than they even realize. The reported comfort levels and preferences of using the computer to write versus writing by hand on paper were a surprise. The expectation was that there would be an overwhelming preference to the use of a computer. However, when one reflects it is perhaps a good thing that students are comfortable using both methods to communicate their ideas in writing. Students are still, more often than not, asked to write in-class timed essays by hand using paper and pen. Even in the one-to-one computer environment at Worcester Academy students must write their final examinations without the aid of a computer. In addition most high-stakes examinations such as ACT, SAT, and AP require a hand-written essay. The only exception to this is the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam that tests a students’ English-language proficiency. TOEFL is an Internet-based examination that all international students are required to take for entrance into US colleges. For this exam students use a computer. At this point it appears that in order to be successful students must be proficient writers no matter what mode is used. Finally, students reported conflicting attitudes about their focus during the writing process. On one hand they reported they were more focused when writing by hand and then reported the same level of focus when they were writing using a computer keyboard. After reviewing observation notes taken while students were writing the in-class timed essay prior to and following the four-week research period one would have predicted that students were much more focused when writing on the computer. Anecdotally most students seemed somewhat to very distracted when writing on paper. Behaviors such as constantly shifting positions in their seats, pencil tapping, erasing, and even some gazing all over the room were observed. However, when students were writing their final essay on the
computer there seemed to be less body movement and more focus on the computer screen. One explanation of this contradiction between what students reported and what was observed may be that the students have not yet developed a self-awareness of how they focus. Other explanations may be that students did not understand the survey questions or that the questions were worded in a way that caused confusion.

The analysis of the Schoology discussion forums revealed yet more surprises. It was expected that a steady increase would be seen both with the hits and the word count. The charts with the number of hits recorded, that is how many times a discussion forum was read, indicated some real highs and lows. Upon closer inspection, it seems that the topic of the discussion drove the amount activity and interest. For example the most active discussion was about movies students had recently viewed. The word count throughout the four-week research period was fairly steady. However, as noted, during the fifth week there was such a large increase in the word count that it seemed necessary to include in these findings. What is most compelling is how engaged the students continued to be in the reading, writing, and communicating process even though they were on vacation. The posts got longer and more descriptive and students began to post pictures of what they were doing and seeing. (One of the great features of Schoology is that the interface looks like Facebook and it is quite easy to imbed photos.) As a teacher, this was quite exciting because it indicated that even though students had returned to their native countries and were no longer immersed in English they continued to think, read, and write in English if even for a short time each day.

The word count comparison between the pre- and post-study essays illustrated that students wrote longer essays using their computers. This outcome was expected, however the large percentage in change was somewhat surprising. Several factors could be attributed to the increase in production. During the four-week study period students were required to think and respond in writing to prompts everyday. If reluctant at first, they became more comfortable with practice. In
addition their English vocabulary is constantly changing and increasing exponentially. Finally students today are proficient on the keyboard and quite simply can type faster than they can write.

**Limitations of Study**

There is ample data to support the assumption that incorporating discussion forums into the daily routine of ELL classes will provide additional practice in English reading and writing, boost self confidence, and encourage collaboration, all of which will translate into lengthier posts and essays. This, then, begs the question as to the quality of what is written. Are ideas stated clearly? Are writing mechanics sound? Is correct grammar used? These particular issues were not explored and are beyond the narrow scope of this action research project that was to focus on and gauge quantity.

The respondent group for this action research project consists of 12 students who are enrolled in three different classes. This is a smaller number of struggling ELL students at Worcester Academy than in past years. Although this small group was appropriate for the purposes of this study and studies analyzed in the literature review utilized similar-sized groups, there are limitations on any far-reaching assumptions that can be made. One must be cautious when drawing conclusions based on such a small sampling.

Finally, this study was conducted over a four-week period that was interrupted by a holiday, a snow day, special schedules, illness, and then Spring Break. It is believed that a more accurate sample of data could be collected if the study were conducted over a longer period of time. This would smooth over any schedule anomalies and disruptions that are out the control of the researcher.

**Further Research**

As the ELL students become more comfortable with their writing, focus must shift from quantity to quality. Although there is a portfolio kept for each student, it would be interesting to create a
common rubric and conduct a comparison of the timed essay that is written prior at the start of school with an essay written at the end of the year under similar circumstances. Criteria would include format, mechanics, content, organization, and grammar. Two or three readers would evaluate the essays. Although we initially encourage students to write more, ultimately the goal is to have students express their ideas in a cohesive manner (that it, write more effectively.)

The findings of this action research project suggest that using a threaded discussion forum encourages student to interact more often and in greater depth with their classmates. It gives them the confidence to express their ideas and consider the opinions of others. The next step would be to measure whether or not that confidence could be translated back to the traditional classroom discussion forum. Would the same students who felt comfortable expressing themselves online be comfortable in face-to-face classroom discussions? Have students who were formally reluctant to be engaged class discussions developed enough self-confidence to speak up in class? Surveys and observations in September could be compared with the same surveys and observations in May to gauge changes. Participation in class discussions and peer collaboration are both important components of all classes and are necessary for success in all content areas at Worcester Academy.

Finally the use of blended learning (combining traditional classroom techniques with technology) is a fairly new concept and ongoing research will continue to provide insights on how the learning experience can be improved for each student. Worcester Academy has just recently adopted Schoology as the official web-based classroom management system for the next academic year. It offers the power of online collaboration combined with the ease of use and design of popular social networking programs. In addition it offers both students and staff a safe environment to extend classroom learning outside of the normal school day.
**Action Plan**

Newly enrolled international students at Worcester Academy face many challenges as they begin their high school careers far from home. As they are adjusting to new surroundings, new food, roommates, a new culture, and a whole range of emotions from homesickness to fears about being accepted, they must also deal with that fact that all of their classes are being conducted in a second language. The goals of the EFL program are to offer each student the opportunity to develop his/her vocabulary and to improve writing compositions while helping to develop fluency, which will facilitate communication (both oral and written) in a wide range of subjects. These new international students are highly motivated to move into classes with domestic native speakers. However, they quite often lack self-confidence in their ability to speak and write English. Thus, they are reluctant to participate in class discussions and collaborate with their domestic peers, both of which are important components of all classes and necessary for success in all content areas at this institution.

Although only a small number of ELL students were available for the action research sample, the outcome overwhelmingly suggests that with daily participation in online discussion forums such as Schoology, students became more confident in both reading and writing English. When comparing essays written at the beginning of week one with essays written within the same 30-minute time frame at the end of week four, the results showed a marked increase in word count within the four-week span. In most cases the increase in the number of words written in the second essay was over 50%. It is apparent that the use of technology tools, such as Schoology, to create a blended learning environment encourages students to be engaged and to write more, often leading to more rapid improvement in English fluency. This is an encouraging start, however, it must be noted that the scope of this study was to measure the
A Class Act: Using Schoology to Encourage Writing in the ELL Classroom

increase in participation and quantity of words written by the ELL student participants. In order to fully achieve the goals of the program one must next look at the quality of what is being produced in addition to the quantity.

It has been suggested by many researchers (Routeman, 2005; Chapman and King, 2009; Beach, Anson, Breuch, & Swiss, 2009) that in order to becomes more proficient writers, students must constantly be engaged in reading and writing in a variety of formats and genres, both formally and informally. Among many guidelines offered by Nessel and Dixon (2008) for writing instructions for ELL’s (noting that these guidelines are relevant for all students) are the following: “Have students write about personally meaningful topics. Emphasize writing as a communication tool. Relate writing assignments to other texts and language activities. Have students share their writing. Engage students in a wide variety of writing activities.” (p. 80) With these guidelines in mind the continued use of threaded discussions in Schoology on a regular basis is a way to encourage students to write, read, and respond, gain self-confidence, and collaborate with their classmates. As Beach et al. (2009) point out “From reading and responding to each others’ posts, students learn to formulate their positions and develop convincing evidence to support those positions.” (p. 119) The anticipated outcome is not only an increase in the number of words written, but also a steady improvement in the content and quality of what is written. In other words, the desired outcome is an overall improvement in all aspects of the international student’s English-language proficiency. This then will give them confidence, enabling them to participate fully in the academic experience at Worcester Academy.

During the eight weeks that are left in the current school year the international students who are currently enrolled in the three EFL classes will be asked to respond to online discussion prompts posted in Schoology. This will become a daily assignment and students will be encouraged not only to post a comment but also to read and respond more frequently to posts made by classmates. With the Nessel and Dixon guidelines in mind and using the techniques suggested in the Discussion
Board (2009) document entitled *Online Discussion for Blended Learning*, topics posted will enhance prior knowledge and encourage discussion to move to a higher level. The topics must be engaging and help students make connections between themselves and what they are reading in the classroom. Currently students in EFL Literature are reading Gary Paulsen’s novel *Hatchet*, which is a story of a young teenager’s survival in the Canadian wilderness following a plane crash. The figure below is an example of a discussion prompt that created a lot of discussion both online and then continued in class the next day. (See Figure A-1.)

![Figure A-1: Sample Discussion Prompt](image)

As a further incentive to participate more frequently in these asynchronous discussions in a thoughtful and meaningful way, students are aware that going forward the discussions are an expectation and will be assessed. The Discussion Board guidelines suggest that clear requirements for participation should be provided. “Requirements should address length or quantity of posts, expectations for content (quality, relevance of posts), and timeliness.” (p. 2) Again, using these
recommendations, discussions board guidelines have been established (See Figure A-2, entitled Threaded Discussions on Schoology: The Keys to Success.) as well as a rubric for grading. (See Figure A-3.)

**Figure A-2: Threaded Discussions on Schoology: The Keys to Success**

- **Threaded Discussions on Schoology**  
  **The Keys to Success**

  - Log into your class in Schoology often. Check to see if new messages or discussion topics have been posted.
  - Take the time to read over and edit all the messages you post.
  - Use complete words and sentences in your online discussion. No "text messaging" abbreviations, allowed! Use English only! This may look like Facebook, but it isn’t.
  - Be an active participant in discussions. Get involved, reply to others, be yourself, and have fun!
  - Be polite to your classmates in your online messages, even when you disagree with them. Never write something in a discussion post that you would not say to someone’s face.
  - If you wish to address/answer a specific message, make sure that you reply to that message in the appropriate place.
Looking ahead to next year, the curriculum will be revised. Schoology has become the “official” classroom management system for the institution. The implication of this is that all faculty will be required to, at the very least, post homework assignments in Schoology. On the other end of the spectrum faculty will be invited to take advantage of all the tools that are available in Schoology to create an authentic blended learning environment for their students.

Classes for new international students will include the use of the online discussion feature as a major component of the curriculum along with more traditional components such as projects, class discussions, writing and reading exercises, and various assessments. During the first week of the first trimester students will participate in a lesson on “Netiquette.” Though not fully developed at
this time, the goal of the lesson will be to develop self-regulation and self-guided behavior when using electronic tools. The essential question will be: what is appropriate behavior for online communication? Students will work individually, in small groups, as a class, and online to list aspirations and fears about participating in an online community. They will develop a set of rules for the online community based on those aspirations and fears. They will learn to use the tools that Schoology has available such as using Drop Box to submit an assignment, participate in threaded discussions, and take online quizzes and tests. Finally, the students will reflect on appropriate online communications. It is estimated that this lesson will cover three or four class periods depending on the English proficiency of the students. It is hoped that students will be able to articulate the rules governing online networking software for school-appropriate use, demonstrate knowledge of basic Schoology tools, communicate effectively in a digital medium, and finally demonstrate the process by which to work meaningfully in the digital environment. This lesson is meant to allow students to construct the rules for their online community. Having students develop and then agree to their own list of rules based on their aspirations and fears is a powerful learning and self-responsibility opportunity in itself.

During trimester one, it is anticipated that students will become comfortable with the online writing tools and will be urged to participate in online discussions frequently. During trimester two, discussions would begin about not only the quantity of what was being written, but also about the quality of the posts. Finally the bar would be raised during trimester three. Students would not only be assessed on frequency and quantity, but they would also be assessed on the content including grammar, sentence structure, and relevance.

The short-term outcome of this intervention has been that students who were previously hesitant to share their ideas are not only writing more words than they did in January, but are writing more frequently. The research results showed that students were choosing to participate in threaded discussions during their personal time outside of school. They are comfortable writing and
responding to a prompt whether it is for a threaded discussion or timed essay. Writing has become a routine part of their day and the dreaded questions (“How much do I have to write? How many sentences do we have to do?”) are no longer heard.

Long-term, it is envisioned that the online discussion tool in Schoology will be a vehicle that will assist students in achieving their ultimate goal of greater fluency in English. This, then, would boost self-confidence, helping students to collaborate with classmates and participate in discussions not only online but in the traditional classroom setting.

Results from the action research have been shared with the Director of Technology Integration and also a colleague who teaches English grammar to the students who participated in the study. Both faculty members who were involved in the validity analysis phase earlier have enthusiastically read and discussed the results and have endorsed the use of Schoolboy. The grammar teacher has also begun incorporating discussion threads into her lesson plans.

Once the final report is completed, plans have been made to present the findings to the Chairman of the English Department. A request will then be made to share the report with the entire department at a professional development workshop scheduled in early May.

Finally, at the urging of the Director of Technology Integration, the findings from this project will be shared with the developers of Schoology. It is a fairly new classroom management system and, as was discovered in the literature review phase of this action research project, there is very little research available as to the effectiveness of its use in a blended learning environment such as at Worcester Academy.

**Conclusions**

The international students who participated in the action research are highly motivated to improve all aspects of their English and all hope to join their American classmates in regular
English Literature classes next year. Given this motivation and the fact that these students are immersed in an English-speaking environment for most of the day, measurable improvement in writing should naturally occur even in a short period of time. However, from the results of this four-week study it is apparent that the use of technology tools, such as Schoology, to create a blended learning environment encourages students to be engaged and to write more, often leading to more rapid improvement in English fluency.

In her book *Writing Essentials*, Reggie Routman (2005) reminds us that when writing, quantity matters. “Students who are excellent writers write a lot.” (p. 65) She goes on to say that “Students need fluency and endurance to pass high-stakes writing tests, and they can only attain that fluency and endurance by doing a great deal of writing.” (p. 65) Schoology has provided a forum for students to read, write, and discuss with fellow classmates not only during the school day but at all hours of the day and while traveling all over the world. They have shared experiences from the mundane such as how many hours they slept, work load anxiety, and the latest haircut to the more sublime such as seeing a baby brother for the first time, realizing how hard their parents work, feelings about being home with friends and revisiting favorite places with a new perspective. Because the format has the same look and feel as social networking sites such as Facebook, students are more comfortable and do write more. Students who are consistently reluctant to join in class conversations are writing long, descriptive passages about a movie they saw, a shrine they visited, a meal they enjoyed, or simply the joy of walking around a peaceful lake.

Schoology is but one classroom management system that is available, but is an example of how coupled with traditional classroom techniques, the use of technology can help create a learning environment that addresses the needs of all learners and encourages them to reach their potential.
References:


Appendix

Writing Survey – Pre and Post-Study

1) What is your gender?
   • Female
   • Male

2) How often do you choose to write in your spare time?
   • I often write in my spare time.
   • I sometimes write in my spare time.
   • I rarely write in my spare time.
   • I never write in my spare time.

3) What kind of writer do you consider yourself?
   • I am an excellent writer.
   • I am a good writer.
   • I am a fair writer.
   • I am a poor writer.

4) How comfortable do you feel writing when you are given a writing prompt?
   • Very comfortable
   • Moderately comfortable
   • Slightly comfortable
   • Not at all comfortable

Please explain your answer with specific details if you can:

5) How much do you generally write when given a writing prompt?
   • I write much more than others.
   • I write more than others.
   • I write about the same as others.
   • I write less than others.

6) If your instructor requires you to respond to a writing prompt by hand on paper, how much better is your writing than if you use your computer to write?
   • Much better
   • Moderately better
   • Slightly better
   • Not at all better
   • No difference

7) If your instructor requires you to respond to a writing prompt using your computer, how much better is your writing than if you write by hand on paper?
8) If your instructor requires you to respond to a writing prompt by hand, how comfortable are you writing?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

9) If your instructor requires you to respond to a writing prompt using your computer, how comfortable are you writing?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

10) If your instructor gives you more time to respond to a writing prompt, how much better is your writing?
    - Much better
    - Moderately better
    - Slightly better
    - Not at all better

11) If your instructor gives you more time to respond to a writing prompt, how comfortable do you feel writing?
    - Very comfortable
    - Moderately comfortable
    - Slightly comfortable
    - It doesn’t make a difference

12) If your instructor gives you a timed writing prompt, how much better is your writing?
    - Much better
    - Moderately better
    - Slightly better
    - Not at all better

13) If your instructor gives you a timed writing prompt, how comfortable do you feel writing?
    - Very comfortable
    - Moderately comfortable
    - Slightly comfortable
    - Uncomfortable

14) If your instructor gives you an untimed writing prompt, how much better is your writing?
    - Much better
    - Moderately better
    - Slightly better
    - Not at all better
15) If your instructor gives you an **untimed** writing prompt, how **comfortable** do you feel writing?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

16) How comfortable do you feel sharing your writing with others?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

17) How comfortable do you feel with the peer review process?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

18) From your past writing experiences, do you prefer writing on paper by hand or typing on a computer?
   - I prefer writing on paper by hand.
   - I prefer writing by typing on a computer.
   - I do not have a preference.

19) How comfortable do you feel writing on paper by hand?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

20) How comfortable do you feel writing by typing on a computer?
   - Very comfortable
   - Moderately comfortable
   - Slightly comfortable
   - Not at all comfortable

21) Do you have more experience writing by hand or on your computer?
   - I have more experience writing by hand.
   - I have more experience writing on the computer.
   - I do not know.

22) From your past writing experiences, is it easier to stay focused when you are writing on paper by hand or typing on a computer?
   - I am more focused when I am writing on paper by hand.
   - I am more focused when I am typing on a computer.
• There is no difference.

23) What types of writing have you done on your computer at Worcester Academy?
• Essays
• Presentations
• Email
• Online discussions for class such as Schoology
• Social networking outside of class such as Facebook

Other:

24) If your instructor requires you to respond to a writing prompt in a Schoology discussion, how comfortable are you writing?
• Very comfortable
• Moderately comfortable
• Slightly comfortable
• Not at all comfortable

25) If your instructor requires you to respond to a writing prompt in a Schoology discussion, how much better is your writing?
• Much better
• Moderately better
• Slightly better
• Not at all better

26) How comfortable do you feel sharing your ideas with others in a Schoology discussion?
• Very comfortable
• Moderately comfortable
• Slightly comfortable
• Not at all comfortable

27) From your past experiences, are you more comfortable discussing a topic online in Schoology or talking about it in a class discussion.
• I am more comfortable online in a Schoology discussion
• I am more comfortable talking in class
• There is no difference.

Please explain your answer with specific details if you can:

26) Would you like to continue to using the Schoology discussion to share your ideas with others?
• Yes, use more often
• Yes, use about the same
• Yes, but not as often
• Never

Please explain your answer with specific details if you can: