



8: CONNECTING TEXT

Christopher Waugh

AGENCY

Students in my secondary English classes no longer write in books. They exist and work in an open online community. We shifted our work online in pursuit of a set of key goals.

As an English department it was our desire to increase their agency as learners. We wanted to make their learning experience a more authentic reflection of how they engage with the world and we aimed to raise their autonomy in the process. To do this we created a personal blog, open to the outside world and unique to its owner, for every teacher and student in the school. We built class blogs and blogs for clubs and groups and we brought them all together under the umbrella we call *The Edutronic*.

Some might imagine our primary motive was to attract students with the lure of modern technology and methods, but this was not the case. The clear imperative, if we were to solve the challenges we faced in motivating and inspiring our cohort of inner London boys to engage with their English learning, was that we had to shift the locus of control, and responsibility, in the classroom from the teacher, to the space between us and the students. It's in this space to which we have shifted the heart of the learning experience, and it's in this space that we position the core artefact of our collaboration – the students' work, our primary text.

Schools and classrooms have maintained a degree of isolation from the outside world that is making what we do in them increasingly rarified. If the product of the classroom has no referent or context outside the classroom, the value of it will also be steadily diminished.

The connected text, posted onto an online blog, is a fluid, interactive entity. It is the central pivot around which all other learning balances. Teachers, students, collaborators, family, peers, audience and critics, all engage with the text produced by the student and each leaves their unique mark. The text enters the flow of the great literary heritage about which we often learn in the classroom, and in doing so, the student-author builds a sense of their own agency in the world and the impact they may have on it. To explore how this might affect the study of a Shakespearian play in English, throughout this chapter I will introduce a range of characters from my classes, the play *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Edutronic*.

Even in the early stages of the study, students avidly use their blogs to record their learning experience, whether it be summaries of scenes and captured quotations, or initial exploration of language and themes. So far, so familiar. Quickly, new players enter



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the fray, adding a frisson to the plot, as can be seen here in the comments made by the students' family under an entry exploring language in *Romeo and Juliet*:

Armend:

Very well described, through your understanding of the play and excellent use of vocabulary.... Well done!!!

Myrvete:

I am very pleased with you and your positive attitude towards writing. Great piece of work and I am always looking forward to reading your work. Keep it up :-))

Myrvete

From the journal of Lis Fejzullahu, age 13.

<http://lis.community.edutronic.net/analyse-language-english-project-part-2-act-1-scene-4-act-4-scene-2/>

And thus, the family are engaged in the learning experience.

Authenticity – the now

We dispute the notion that the classroom is primarily a venue for the preparation of students for the 'real world'. To us, and our students, the classroom is very much the real world. In the classroom, our experience is rich, complex, unpredictable and frequently demands everything of us. We don't come to the classroom in order to be ready for some imperceptible future, we come to luxuriate in the now. This being the case, it becomes inevitable that the product of our time in the classroom, often a text, should also be invested with a status and integrity that befits the setting from which it arose. In this way, students create text that has purpose beyond the instruments and culture of the education system.

Hi there people, this is Samy welcoming you to Edutronic. Edutronic is a site where you can be able to talk to the world from your very own computer. You can tell the world about how you're feeling or just what your homework is by publishing your work like I am doing now. When you send your work you can either choose if you want your work to be seen by the world or you can just send it to your teacher by using the private button. Edutronic is a new exciting way to produce your work. So have Fun.

Samy Salim, age 12: First entry to his online journal.

<http://samysalim.student.edutronic.net/2012/10/05/welcome-to-edutronic/>



In our department the notion of writing text in order to achieve a grade is an anathema. Our students create texts to communicate ideas, feelings, fragments of their real and imagined lives. They write to record experiences and sometimes to help themselves to think through a complicated idea. We work to help them to create texts that achieve these objectives, and as part of this, we will employ the tools we have created to measure and acknowledge thresholds through which the students may pass in their development as writers.

These thresholds are not the objective of the writing. It does not follow that while a teacher must define and record students' attainment and progress in order to identify opportunities for further learning – or simply to feed the state school bureaucracy – that this measure should be treated as the primary outcome of the students' efforts.

This fluidity of the students' connected texts has led to a complete redevelopment of our means of assessment. Our new schemes of summative validation and feedback are set up as fixed standards. These are published online too, supported by detailed exemplars and represented by badges. Students can put their work forward for consideration and, if successful, are able to unlock multiple achievements with one piece of work. If they are unsuccessful they will go back to the work and further refine it.

Like everything else in the learning experience the assessment processes orbit around the primary text, validating aspects and skills demonstrated, but never over-shadowing it or exerting so much of a gravitational force as to distort its central purpose, as defined by the author.

Here Jamie is exploring the use of personification in *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare uses a wide variety of dramatic devices in the play *Macbeth*. A dramatic device *Macbeth* uses is personification in this extract from Act 2 Scene 1. *Macbeth* sees a dagger before him which is an illusion and potentially a sign of madness. He says

'Thou marshall'st me the way I was going; and such a instrument I was to use.'

Macbeth uses personification by using the object - in this case a knife - as if it were a living being. In this quote *Macbeth* uses the words 'marshall'st me' which means it is guiding him. He says this to the knife which he is imagining to see in front of his eyes. He says to the knife to guide him as a metaphor to control the way he is going. The quote chosen shows hints of remorse even if he continues with the plan to kill King Duncan. In the play *Macbeth* sees a dagger because he is uncertain whether to kill Duncan or not. He feels weakness if he doesn't continue with the plan but will feel remorse if he continues so he needs guidance on what he is going to do. He uses the dagger to justify his actions.

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Comment:

Chris Waugh: Jamie, your work is always impressive and this analysis is no exception.

I'd like to address some aspects of the mechanics of your writing. In particular the sentence structure. Could you have a look at the sentence:

'A complex device is personification in this extract from Act 2 Scene 1.'

and let me know if you can't think of a way of making it more clear. If you can't, I'll help you out.

This piece clearly meets the criteria for the Discovery badge – so well done. It has now been awarded to you!



Fig. 8.1 The Discovery Badge

If you'd like to develop it further and try for the Stage 3 'Figure it out' badge, then you'll want to add more exploration of why Shakespeare is using this personification with Macbeth at this stage of the play – what's it telling the audience about Macbeth's state of mind and what motivates him?

Righto!

CW

Jamie Souffrin-Watts, age 12. <http://jsouffrin-watts.community.edutronic.net/personification/>

After receiving the comment, Jamie has clearly gone back to his analysis and developed it further to explore the wider implications of the invisible dagger. Further to this he then made a prop of the dagger from this scene, which was rendered with a transparent blade, indicating that it is in fact a 'dagger of the mind'. Another student produced a wireframe outline of a dagger to represent the same effect. They all uploaded images of these made objects to their blogs to sit alongside their written analysis.

The student's connected text has its own integrity, its own purpose and it is as much judged by its audience and author as it might be by the teacher. In this way we do not assume we are always the founts of all knowledge, and I will often cede my role as arbiter of all value. Instead the teacher becomes an ally in the process; sometimes we are a guide, sometimes an editor; sometimes a reader and at other times an active and avid contributor to the conversation the text has stimulated. Connecting a classroom text allows for it to reach an audience, be archived for future reference, be modified, replicated, contested. A connected text can fulfil its human purpose, whatever that may be.

Students' learning should not be devised in such a way as it divorces the form and its purpose. I have seen students being given a pen and paper to 'write an email' to an imagined employer to ask for a job. This 'email' is then taken in by a teacher and marked for written accuracy and stylistic fidelity. No-one would argue with the value of being able to perform this kind of writing task, but there must be a strong argument against this kind of activity in terms of the confusion of purpose. Few people write to prove they can write. They write to think, to record and to communicate. With this impetus denied them, is there any surprise that students lose interest in writing?

Surely students could simply be asked to do a similar task: write an email. The email should be written on a computer and should address a real query to an actual person who exists in the world of the student. This is real. The students will care more about their spelling and form in this scenario than any kind of high-stakes system assessment could ever enforce. The holy grail of students' concern over the accuracy of their own writing is achieved with shocking ease, it is as natural as the actual process of making the corrections needed.

AUTONOMY

The benefit of a connected text is not as simple as merely 'having an audience'. The act of choice in sending something out into the world, under your own name, and of your own creation is a singularly autonomous act. This assertion of self is not uncommon for students in a school classroom, in fact it is an important part of what makes the school such a real and authentic place for students and teachers alike, but the formalisation of this in text is unique. The affordances of this self-assertion are often immediately clear. The text, which frequently represents the most tangible product of the classroom experience for students, extends their voice. The value they place on it is reinforced by the fact that they have the power to publish the text to the world. It has to pass through no gatekeeper and no filtering system, it simply comes into existence as a result of their will. Once again, they are not rehearsing for the real world, they are entering it.

Yet, blogs provide a number of mechanisms for moderation and mediation. Students can act autonomously and, at the same time, adults can observe and subtly moderate the whole process. Young people need this mediation in the online world, and the leap of faith that adults make when engaging with students in the online domain is one that instantly engages them as moderators and guides. Working with students and the text they create online also allows another conversation to progress, the one about the online identity and the far-reaching, often indelible, impact of putting anything online under your own name. A conversation about the future web-search performed by a prospective employer will often help bring to sharp focus the substance of any online utterance.



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Students already use connected texts via a wide range of social media platforms to engage with the world and define and discover who they are - to us it's imperative that the work we do with them, exploring the world's great texts and developing language and self-expression, happens in this setting too, so that they may continue to incorporate what they learn in the classroom into their own fabric of experience.

THE ESTABLISHED WRITTEN TEXT

We believe it is again time to rewrite the rules about learning in English that are being continuously refined over the centuries of what some might call the great English Literary Heritage. As teachers have always done, we simply, and humbly, hope to introduce more students more effectively to the world of the text and ensure they have access to it for their entire lives.

In our classrooms the established, canonical literary text, is still an object of great importance. We work hard to develop lines of inquiry that originate from ideas and features in the literary texts selected from the canon. In finding transformative value in connecting these texts to our students' own experience, we haven't abandoned our belief in the great value of the printed plays, novels, poetry in our curriculum - nor their existing modes of transmission. It is also not our view that the connected text has usurped these other forms in literature. Instead we see the connected text as a venue for the exploration of these texts - and potentially a catalyst for the creation of great literature of the future.

Students can use their online blog to record quotes and data about a literary text they are studying. They can record themselves reading or performing excerpts or store images of related objects. They can even readily assimilate third-party information into their own responses, further augmenting the role a single teacher can play in developing the range and sophistication of their responses to a primary text. We will often engage in a conversation with the student as part of their online text that allows them to support and refine the use for this extraneous information. In this way the online text enables the development of the skills of selection and deduction of information, as well as assimilation from external sources - as opposed to the typical 'online research' procedure which largely consists of the reproduction of existing, authorised, facts and information.

Henry: (27 December 2012) Hey Sir; I was just wondering if you had read my piece yet, as you're normally very speedy at replying to things. Hope your breaks going well.

Chris Waugh: ...The observation and thinking inherent in this answer is outstanding, Henry. Genuinely outstanding. I'd now like to work with you to craft your writing so its sophistication matches that of the ideas you're expressing. Let's discuss it on Tuesday. In the meantime I'd like to show you a couple of examples of other pieces of writing



that you might like to use as a guide for your own development. I'll upload them here to your journal.

Dr Ovenden: Henry, I agree with Mr Waugh's comments on your insightful analysis. I look forward to reading the redrafted version. Good luck!

Milo: Well, Henry I used some of your work for my English essay

Henry: I am continuing with my essay on fate, but have a look at this article I found online: [URL removed] I'm not sure what you will think of it, but I was looking at the script, then was wondering why they blame everything on fate. This is a testament to that.

Henry Howeld, age 12. Excerpts from the comment stream on drafts for an essay on fate in *Romeo and Juliet*.

<http://henryashoweld.student.edutronic.net/author/henry/page/10/>

These online texts allow our students to engage in their writing or analysis as a crafted process. Henry has taken complete ownership of the process of drafting his essay, and instead of concentrating on what answer the teacher seeks, or what will get him the best grades, he's acting in pursuit of the best answer to the question of fate in the play. The level of autonomy shown by students working online is difficult to achieve in on paper, and their writing demonstrates in content and form a real sense of audience and purpose.

The problem with current methods of teaching is that these core elements are often expressed only as theoretical. Even those text concepts, audience and purpose, have been made abstract in the education system. Whereas an adult writer would consider the purpose of a text or its audience as an integral part of determining its form and content, school student writers have to learn formulae to make the same judgements. They have to determine who the audience 'would be' and what the purpose of the text 'would be' as yet another abstraction of motive. They are then taught forms that match particular purposes (rhetorical questions and the 'rule of three' for persuasive writing, metaphor for descriptive writing).

The crime in this is that as social beings, students already have enormous reserves of knowledge about relevant language registers for various situations and purposes. The abstraction of the context for the texts they create in English at school alienates them from their own experience. They are left having to be taught things they already know, or could determine for themselves based on experience. This in turn devalues their own sense for how language might work in a text. The rigidity of the formulae stifles the infinite variety and nuance in language. The genius that is shown to them in the seminal texts they study is denied in their own writing in the rush to ensure their text fits the prescribed formulae.



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THE EDITABLE TEXT

Secondary teachers play a valuable role in the classroom, and the time students spend with them is an extraordinary investment. Placing the students' writing online and thereby shifting the locus of control towards them as authors doesn't imply the devaluation of the expertise of the teacher. If anything, it removes many of the usual social impediments in order to facilitate proper academic engagement.

In connecting the students' writing to the online domain, new options for its use as a cognitive tool are enabled. The primary texts in the classroom have largely been those from the canon that are determined by the syllabus - and this is as it should be. A great deal of metacognitive benefit can be derived from any text where reasoning patterns inherent in the study of literature such as understanding the writer's intention relating to technique, narrative structure, figurative language, symbolism, genre, are explored in pure and comparative terms.

Students' connected texts add a capacity to perform these higher order procedures in relation to their own writing by virtue of one of the key features of an online text: its editability. The students are able to respond to feedback on minute details. Currently in English secondary schools, there is a fad for the requirement that students' write a response to the written feedback from their teacher. While this 'green pen rule' is largely a reaction to the desire to make all teacher actions visible to an avid inspectorate, it could not be further from the natural process of editing work. It is designed primarily to provide evidence of assimilation of the feedback by the student, as opposed to being a means of improving their writing. This 'performance of learning' further alienates the writer from the inherent value of engaging in creating text as an artefact, as they are now writing, usually in a green pen, a separate text to validate their understanding of the criticism of the initial draft. Nothing could be less satisfying, nor less purposeful.

By contrast, as the connected text remains permanently editable, when feedback is offered, the writer can experiment with that input. They can, should they wish to, engage in a conversation about the recommended change and even seek more - or wider - input. The ease of this process, and the fact that revisions are always stored which allow for the resurrection of older versions, leads to extensive new possibilities for learning about language in writing.

The silence is deafening and the still air blocks your way like a brick wall. From a distance classroom you can hear the muffled noise of a teacher's music. You will never guess what they listen to, it is torture to your ears.

COMMENT:

Chris Waugh

As we discussed, the main job for you to do now is to concentrate on strengthening the imagery in your piece - the notion of 'showing, not telling' will help a lot here.



I like the use of the second-person pronoun 'you' as it offers a real sense of 'being there' to me as a reader.

We also discussed the idea that you may be able to generate an extended military metaphor throughout the piece. If you can do that successfully, you'll lift this work into a new level.

Nice going!

CW

The silence is deafening and the still air blocks your way like a brick wall. **You take every step with precision trying not to get spotted by the enemy. Capture at this point would be the end of the world.** From a distance classroom you can hear the muffled noise of a teacher's music. You will never guess what they listen to, it is torture to your ears.

George Flannagan, age 15.

<http://george.student.edutronic.net/2015/02/01/school-from-8-30-to-6-30/>

One area of great potential here is the exploration of the literary dimensions of grammar and punctuation. Students are able to explore and implement a range of grammatical formulations in a single piece of writing to experiment with their effect. In doing so they're operating at a highly sophisticated cognitive level. This enables discussion of questions like: 'What effect does combining those two sentences using a relative clause have on the reader's appreciation of the relationship between the two otherwise-unrelated characteristics of the setting?' This can be done online without the student being stifled by the high-stakes effect of making a change that would cause the piece have to be re-written in its entirety for the alteration to be integrated into the work. What's more, the current version is always available to all.

In overcoming the terror of the blank page, the text becomes fluid and responsive, something that is always available for further development. The fear of error is reduced and replaced with a designer's approach to creating texts. The text becomes a made thing, an artefact.

Many of the affordances of visual texts are also present in the connected text. The process of creation is frequently non-linear. Information can be sequenced in many different ways and can incorporate material from many different sources. It can be laid out and re-ordered, re-purposed and placed into new contexts alongside other texts, written or - just as readily - drawn, photographed, filmed or spoken.

Frequently students will leave a piece of work to lie fallow, only to return to it with vigour and energy at a later stage, thereby bringing new knowledge and skill to bear.

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THE SOCIAL DISCOURSE

Every text entry on a student's online blog carries with it a comment field. This invites a discussion around intended effects and a reader response that has previously been impossible to achieve. A writer's close relatives and friends will subscribe to their blog and receive any new entries by email the instant they're posted. Students thus already know there's an interested audience there for their work. Comments from teachers enter into a stream where comments also appear from the entire literary world, which both delineates the value and purpose of the teacher's comment. This provides the student with a whole array of other feedback, centred, as always, on the text they create.

Texts are constructed socially through comment-based conversation, discussion in class when the work is displayed on the board, through the gathering of responses from a wide array of people, and ultimately from anonymous readers.

Chris Waugh: Tyrese,

You have created a thing of beauty here. There are many things I love about this poem, but the feature that stands out the most to me is the choices you've made about the line breaks.

I keep going back to read this:

'As fresh as the air,
Like a blade slicing through the wind,
We glide as one you and I,
Even as one lives and one dies.'

...because it really evokes such a strong feeling of exaltation and sadness. What would be a good title, do you think?

Please read this to the class tomorrow.

Colin Tovey (Tyrese's Father)

What he said.

As I told you earlier, Son, you've learned more about the English language in the past year than I've learned in the last 42.

You're a very gifted young man and if this is how you start out then who knows what you can go on to achieve.

We're all very proud of you.

Penny (Internet reader)

Wow! What a great poem, really evocative. It reminds me of the ospreys I've been watching on the web in Wales (they have their own webcam...). That first verse is really powerful – controlled and carefully crafted. Good work.

Kerry Pulley

Hi Tyrese,

I am an English teacher in another school. I hope you don't mind if I comment on your poem. One of the things that I thought was most beautiful, particularly in the first stanza, was the way the number of 'beats' in the lines links so closely with the meaning of the words you have used...

Kaiyum (Peer)

I like the first stanza when you wrote:

We glide as one you and I

Even one live and one dies

This was like a bird eye view as a friend I like it

I would never give you a criticism because it just too good

John Potter (University Lecturer)

Tyrese, I hope that you don't mind that I shared your poem at a talk I did for teachers and other educators at the United Kingdom Literacy Association at the weekend. Also, Mr Waugh, your comments! And all the others. This was after a great talk from the writer Aiden Chambers about the power of writing in our lives. I hadn't planned to do it I just suddenly remembered the last great example I'd seen and shared it and it was your work! There's more to come from you I know! Keep going with it and good luck!

John

Tyrese (Author)

Thanks I would love it.

Tyrese Peters-Tovey, age 11. Selected comments from the Poem "Bird's Eye View"
<http://tyrese.community.edutronic.net/poem/>

In this case the comment stream built over a period of just a few days, clearly demonstrating the power of the social discourse around a connected text. Tyrese was simply performing a classroom task, in this case writing a poem, but the range of responses, from the emotional affirmation from his father to the detailed technical



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evaluation from the teacher online, lead to him experiencing the empowerment of having his creative work appreciated by others. Again, in this sequence, the teacher played a role, but was not the gatekeeper. Tyrese could access an audience and a response independently of the teacher, which subtly authenticates the creative work of the classroom. Again the work they do in school becomes the most pressing reality for the student.

Students also engage with the work of others, including students from other classes and other years, as part of their daily work. They look into the texts that others are creating in the same task as they may be performing. The connected text enables a much higher degree of mutual collaboration and peer-teaching than do most clumsy classroom strategies aimed at stimulating this. They inform each other's work, and they show appreciation for each other's success. Their work shows signs of their peer audience and often has encoded within it subtle irony and in-jokes designed only for their specific peer audience. All this is rich and alive, and neither can nor should be described by a curriculum or assessment rubric. While the text is functioning as an expression of the author on the instrumental level - as it fulfils the requirements of the task provided - it also operates on a social level, where it engages in an interplay with selected peers.

This form of multi-level textuality also heralds a new form of 'privacy'. While the online world increasingly moves in the direction where all information is available to everyone all the time, the youth in our classrooms are devising ever more subtle ways of encoding their social messages underneath the surface via idiom. This rich vein of nuanced language is enabled in the connected text by virtue of its existing in the public domain.

TEXT COMMUNITY

Knowledge is important, but what's even more important is knowing what to do with it. In the past, students would closely guard their written answers for fear that one of their peers might gain advantage by accessing their best material. These days they are becoming increasingly aware that the real capacity that is going to be of value, once they have acquired the requisite knowledge to be able to effectively evaluate and analyse their current problem, is their ability to express their ideas with clarity and effect.

Some of our students' journal entries that provide effective and detailed analysis of core English texts already gain first page rankings on popular search engines for even the most generic of search phrases. They have accessed the academic world for themselves, and they have added something that is of value to others.





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The endurance of an online text allows a narrative to build as years pass. Old work is not discarded; rather, it passes into the history of the students' wider body of work. Ultimately, through this publishing format their work enters exactly the great literary heritage from which it first arose. The students' work enters a temporal stream, accessible to all, and retrievable at any moment by any person. Our classrooms, far from being a cul-de-sac have a direct connection to the main line of the world and its texts.



