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Writer's Workshop and Technology

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An Action Research Project

By: Stephanie Pullman

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Abstract

The intent of this research was to determine what effect an increased use of technology, (meaning word processing, digital tools and use of websites) in Writer's Workshop assignments would have on the quality of writing, engagement and enthusiasm for writing. A writer's workshop is meant to expose students to the different genres and styles of writing. It is taught in a workshop format where there is a mini-lesson about a particular topic, time for the students to write independently and to receive feedback from both the teacher and peers. The research study took place at a private Montessori School in an Upper Elementary classroom. The sources of data collection used in this research included three writing samples, pre and post surveys of the children and other teachers in the classroom and observation sheets kept throughout the project. The data showed that the student's engagement and interest increased with the addition of technology into the writer's workshop. The data also showed that the scores on their writing also increased. The results of this research indicate that having a variety of technological tools to choose from when doing Writer's Workshop assignments can benefit students' ability to improve their writing skills. The specific skills that improved were better use of vocabulary, expanded choice of subject matter, basic grammar and punctuation, and the ability to assess one's work.

In January 2014, I became an online learner at St. Catherine's University. The program opened my eyes to the world of technology. I quickly saw the future of learning for the Upper Elementary Students in my Montessori classroom. Many digital tools, websites and articles about using technology for learning were presented. I started to read about many classrooms around the country using technology in their classrooms. I found articles and blogs by Montessorians who have also weighed in on what works and what doesn't in integrating technology while still maintaining an authentic Montessori environment. I became very excited about how the world of technology could enhance my student's learning.

I have been teaching a Writer's Workshop to 4, 5 and 6th graders for four years. A writer's workshop is meant to expose students to the different genres and styles of writing. It is taught in a workshop format where there is a mini-lesson about a particular topic, time for the students to write independently and to receive feedback from both the teacher and peers. At the end of last year, I did not think my student's writing possessed the strong skills or had the kind of depth that I was striving for. They typically stayed within the same subject matter and used limited vocabulary. I also noticed that the student's engagement and motivation went up when I added a technology component to a lesson or assignment. I wanted to see if the student's writing would improve if a new digital tool were included in every writing assignment. For this research project, I decided I would work with students in the 5th and 6th grades who had already had one year of Writer's Workshop with me.

The writer's workshop has shown to boost the attitude, interest and quality of writing for elementary children (Kohnke, 2006). The format typically involves a mini-lesson on a

specific writing technique, at least 30 minutes of writing time followed by a sharing time where the children read their pieces aloud and receive feedback from their peers. Within the writing time, the teacher meets with the students individually to discuss their writing. Donald Graves and Lucy Calkins are often cited as the architects of the Writer's Workshop. They have both written extensively on how to run a writer's workshop, Graves in his book, *A Fresh Look at Writing*, 1994 and Calkins in hers titled, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 1986. Both Calkins and Graves believe strongly that children need to be given the opportunity to write every day about what interests them.

In her dissertation on implementing a Writer's wWrkshop into a fourth grade classroom, Kohnke found through her own observations and surveys given to the students that, "the bonds of my classroom community became stronger and more meaningful through our shared writing experience" (2006, p.iii).

 I personally have found success using this model. Despite finding success, I still think there is room for improvement; specifically in the quality of the content my students are producing and their enthusiasm and engagement in the writing process. I believe the missing link is technology. Today's students are deeply engaged in technology in many areas of their lives. I am interested in finding out if integrating technology into the Writer's Workshop will increase the quality of the work as well as the student's interest in our Writer's Workshop.

A number of studies have shown when using technology in the classroom, students are more inspired and motivated to learn and work. (Allin, 2003; Godzicki, Godzicki, Krofel & Michaels, 2013,;McAleer, 2009; Weinberg, 2010). After integrating technology into the classrooms in their study, Godzicki et al. (2013), found motivation and engagement

improved by 9%. They also found that the "student's behavior was more animated towards the learning objectives when technology was used" (Godzicki et al., 2013, p. 108).

Prensky (2001) suggests that students today are taking in and synthesizing information in an entirely different way than previous generations. It is clear to me that teaching writing to today's students must include digital tools in order to meet their needs and prepare them for the future.

Introducing writing concepts using excellent children's literature is an effective approach to inspiring children to write. Calkins (1986) recommends many children's books to use for mini lessons in the writer's workshop. Kara-Soteriou, Zawilinski and Henry (2007), recommend children's literature as well as websites and software to further enhance the child's learning experience. I used their recommendations for my action research project. I find this approach very appealing as it does not replace reading books or teaching important writing skills, but further adds to the process by adding technology.

There are many intriguing activities and programs that have been developed for writing on the computer. One process is digital storytelling, which is the use of digital tools such as photographs, drawings and narration to tell an emotionally engaging story. Banaszewski (2002), wrote about his experience working with fourth and fifth graders on digital stories. In a survey, Banaszewski asked children before his digital story project whether they considered themselves writers. Sixty percent said yes. After the project, ninety percent said yes. He said he has "yet to find anything as motivating and influential on student's self-expression as helping them tell stories about an important place (with a digital story)." There are also software programs and websites that can be used for writer's workshop, such as Inspiration, a story map program; Storybird, a website giving children

inspiration with artwork and words for story writing; Kid blog, a website for kids to create

their own blogs in a safe environment; and Zine projects. The Zine project in particular

strikes me as the perfect balance of writing and technology. There is opportunity for children

to write about what matters to them in many different genres, to research their topic on the

Internet and incorporate both handwritten and computerized artwork and text. There is

clearly a wide range of ways to use technology for this project. Having a variety of materials

to choose from works well in a Montessori classroom where children are given choices as to

how they will reach their goals.

Weinberg (2010) reported both the positives and negatives of using technology in the

classroom. She conducted several focus groups with children to find out what they liked and

disliked about using technology. Her study suggests that teachers should take the child's

perspective and feedback into account when creating lessons. Weinberg found through

careful observation and focus groups that the children enjoyed their school work more and

reported that they thought their work was better when they used technology. The main

downside she found was frustration when the technology failed in some way.

Another downside, as reported by Allin (2003), is that a teacher's own knowledge

and comfort in using technology dictates how it is used. Somerindyke (2001), found that the

negative impacts of having high levels of technology in the classroom were computer

malfunction causing loss of teaching time and frustration for both teachers and children. She

found many classrooms having lack of space for computers and seating. There are also

teachers who are not familiar with or are resistant to using technology. Lastly, she found that

the novelty of the computer or computer software has the potential to wear off if not rotated

and renewed frequently.

In comparing the positive and negative outcomes in the research cited in this literature review, the negatives are minimal or at least easily remedied, compared to the positive results.

Many studies have also found that the teacher's or school's philosophy greatly impacts how technology is used in the classroom. Weinberg reports that the teachers participating in her study had what she called "constructivist" teaching philosophy (Weinberg, 2010, p. 181). In a constructivist classroom, the children actively work with the technology and are able to ask questions and explore. This methodology is consistent with a Montessori classroom. The children are shown how to use computers, software, or digital cameras, just like they are shown how to use the checkerboard or grammar boxes. The students are then encouraged to work with the material independently to create their own meaning of the content. Weinberg suggests there might have been a different outcome if the same study was conducted in a traditional classroom. Allin (2003) also discusses how the methodology used in the classroom is the driving force of whether or not a teacher is motivated to use technology in her classroom. He writes, "only those teachers interested in exploring new and innovative instructional practices are likely to be comfortable with the computer's presence in the classroom" (Allin, 2003, p.18).

These examples clearly show how the Writer's Workshop enhances the writing experience for children. It is important to note that the Writer's Workshop is taught in addition to the general mechanics and "rules" of writing. The Writer's Workshop allows the students to put those rules to work and write about topics that have personal meaning. The research also shows that when working with technology in the classroom, children are more productive on many different levels. Adding a technology component to the Writer's

Workshop will give students one more dimension in finding their own writing voice. They will explore technological tools and increase understanding of what best supports the stories they want to tell. I believe the combination of writing and technology will give students the skills they need to be successful in their future endeavors.

Description of Research Process

To assess the effects of adding technology to Writer's Workshop I used five data sources to collect results. The data sources include a survey sent to my two colleagues about writing in our classroom, a rubric for grading the writing work, an observation sheet for lesson and work time, a pre and post interview with the students participating in the study, and a pre-project writing assignment to use as a baseline.

I conducted my project in a private Montessori school in a suburb in the United States. There were seven boys and six girls, ages nine to twelve included in the study. All of the students have been in my Writer's Workshop for at least one year. I sent out a classroom Internet contract (see Appendix A) to all of the students in my class. Both the students and the parents were required to sign the contract in order for the children to use the Internet in the classroom. Before school started I sent out a survey to my colleagues to get an idea of how they view our students' writing as well as their views on using technology in the classroom (see Appendix B).

The first week of the school year I gave the students a writing assignment to serve as a baseline to compare their writing to after the project is complete. I used a rubric to assess their work (see Appendix C). I then conducted interviews with groups of three children at a time. The interview consisted of questions about their previous experience in Writer's

Workshop, how they view themselves as writers and how they feel about using technology in the classroom (see Appendix D).

I planned two lessons for the Writer's Workshop that had an increased use of technology as well as doing a few smaller activities using the computer. The first activity was to create a cover for their Writer's Workshop binder using tools in Microsoft word. In the past the children used colored pencils or markers to create their cover.

The first writing lesson I created came from an idea I found in the article by (Kara-Soteriou, J. et al. 2007). The idea was to use the book *ABC Jazz* by Wynton Marsalis to inspire the children to write poetry. The book is a wonderful resource for learning about Jazz musicians as well as many different types of poetry. The students then chose a style of poetry for their own poem. The article recommended rhymezone.com to help the students find new vocabulary words and rhyming words. They used rhymezone.com as well as wordsbyletter.com and mydictionary.com to enrich their vocabulary. After the poems were edited and completed, the students created a graphic look for their poem and a classroom book was created of all the poems. I assessed each student's work with the writing rubric. I also kept notes on my observation form during lessons and work time. My aim for this lesson was to increase the vocabulary in the students' writing. I observed for engagement and participation. I also observed for when the students choose to work on this during independent work time. I wanted to see if using the computer for word processing as well as using new web sites to enhance their work would make for better writing and more enthusiasm on the part of the students.

The second lesson was inspired by Lucy Calkins called a small moment story. This lesson teaches the students about what makes a good story. Concepts such as, "show not tell," writing a good opening hook and a satisfying ending were covered. I added three digital components to the lesson. First, the students created a story outline form in Microsoft word. They used the outline form that they created on the computer to outline the ideas for their own story. They printed the outline and handed it in to me for editing. Once I gave them the go ahead to write their first draft, I gave them a choice as to whether they would like to write on the computer first or with paper and pencil. The second part of the lesson was about digital citizenship. I then showed them the website Kidblog and explained that they would be uploading their story to the blog and I would give them comments on the blog. We had an "Author's Chair" time where the students read their stories to the group. I provided a comment form with space for them to write three positive statements about the other's stories. This is practice for the future when I hope to allow the students to give each other feedback on the blog itself. I filled out an observation form during lessons as well as when the children were working on their assignments independently (see Appendix E).

The aim for this lesson was to see if knowing that they will share their written work on a digital platform would result in better writing and more engagement and enthusiasm among the students. I used the rubric to assess their stories. I also observed during lessons and independent. work time. I asked students questions about their experiences in doing these lessons and compared the answers to their original interviews, pre-Action Research Project.

Analysis of Data

The first set of data I collected was a survey of the other two teachers who team-teach with me. We each have areas that we are responsible for planning and teaching. We meet regularly and share our lesson plans weekly so we know what the others are

doing and can be of assistance when necessary. At the beginning of the project, both teachers said they thought the writing of the students in our class was average or at grade level, with room for improvement. They both cited positive engagement and attitudes among the children when working with technology. However, neither teacher is enthusiastic about using technology in their lesson plans.

The second data source was a baseline writing sample by the children on the first week of school. I used the rubric created for this project to score the papers. The prompt was to write a three to four paragraph essay about their summer. They wrote one draft. One of the thirteen students scored at the low level, ten of the children scored at Middle Level, and 2 scored at the High Level. This outcome is consistent with my colleague's view of our student's writing as being average or at grade level. The results are shown in Figure 1.
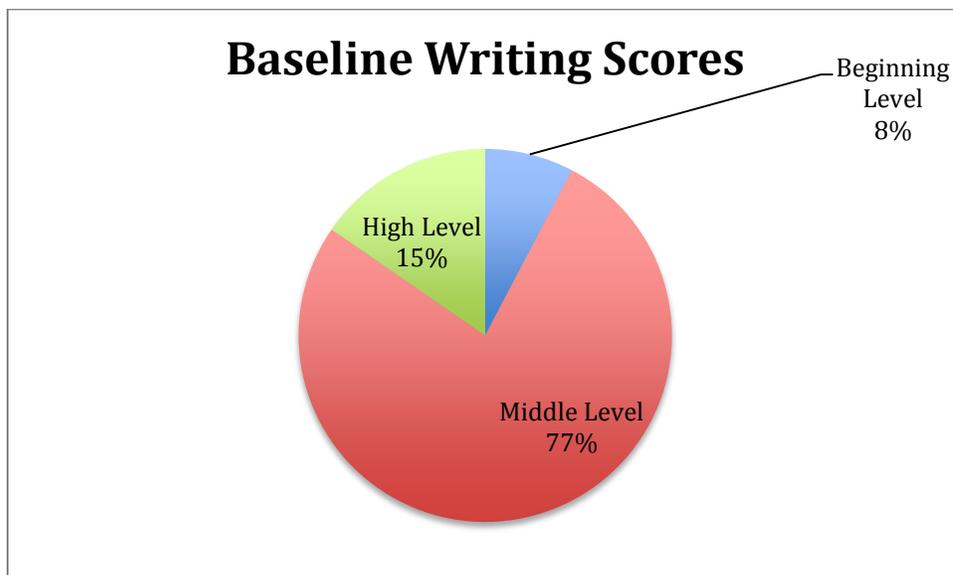

Figure 1. Assessment Scores for baseline writing sample.

After collecting the baseline writing sample, I interviewed the children included in the study about last year's writer's workshop. I found surprising answers and some patterns in the students' answers. One surprising answer was that five out of the 13 children said they preferred to use paper and pencil for writing assignments than a computer when given a choice. Three children said they like to write the rough draft with paper and pencil and then do the re-writes on the computer, and four children said they would choose a computer over paper and pencil. The main reason the eight children chose paper and pencil (this includes the three who would start with a pencil) over the computer was that they "could get their feelings and ideas out better" on paper than on the computer. One reason for citing this was fear of having work deleted and having to start over again. Another reason was the students didn't think they that they typed well or fast enough to type the rough draft on the computer.

I pared down the post-project survey down to three questions that I thought were most pertinent to the study. In the survey conducted after the project was complete, none of the children said they would choose to do their writing assignments with paper and pencil only. Nine children said they would use paper and pencil for their first draft and then do the re-writes and final draft on the computer. Four of the children said they would choose a computer only, just as in the first survey. Six more children chose writing the rough draft in pencil and then writing subsequent drafts on the computer. They said they liked that the computer automatically checked their work for spelling and it was a faster process than handwriting all of the drafts. Just as in the initial survey, some of the reasons for this were that they could get their ideas out better with pencil and paper, that they were afraid to lose their work and have to start

all over and they felt more "safe" having the original written paper in their notebook.

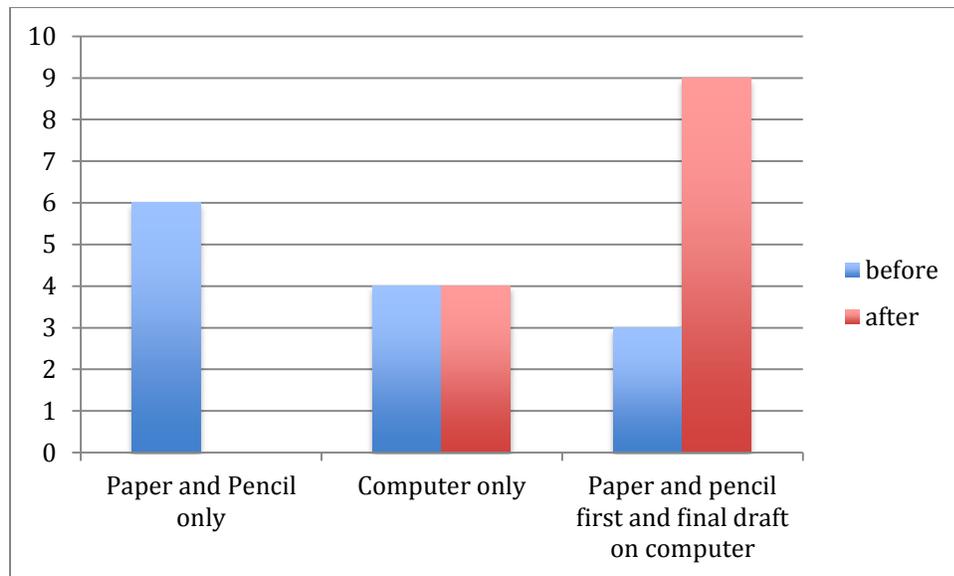The comparison of results is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Comparison of what tools the child would choose to work with before and after the project was implemented.

Another question on the survey was "Do you consider yourself a good writer?" Before the project, nine children said they considered themselves a "so-so," or "in the middle" writer. Three children did not consider themselves a good writer and three said yes, they are a good writer. In asking the same question after the project, seven children said so-so or in the middle, zero children said no and six children said yes. The children who said so-so or "in the middle" were able to articulate quite well what they thought their writing lacked. Three children said they felt that their vocabulary was lacking and they tended to use common and over-used words. They felt that if they could build their vocabulary, their writing would get better. I took this as direct result of the poetry lesson. The work on the poems highlighted the need for expanding the vocabulary of the students. Other students said they need to work on putting their ideas together

better and create better "flow." Some other students just acknowledged that they had

room for improvement. The comparison of results is shown in Figure 3.

      The student's increased ability to pin point what they could improve upon was

an unexpected positive outcome of this project. It occurred to me that this might be a

more important outcome than raising the scores of the writing. The ability to critically

look at your own or others' work is a higher order skill that is important to cultivate.
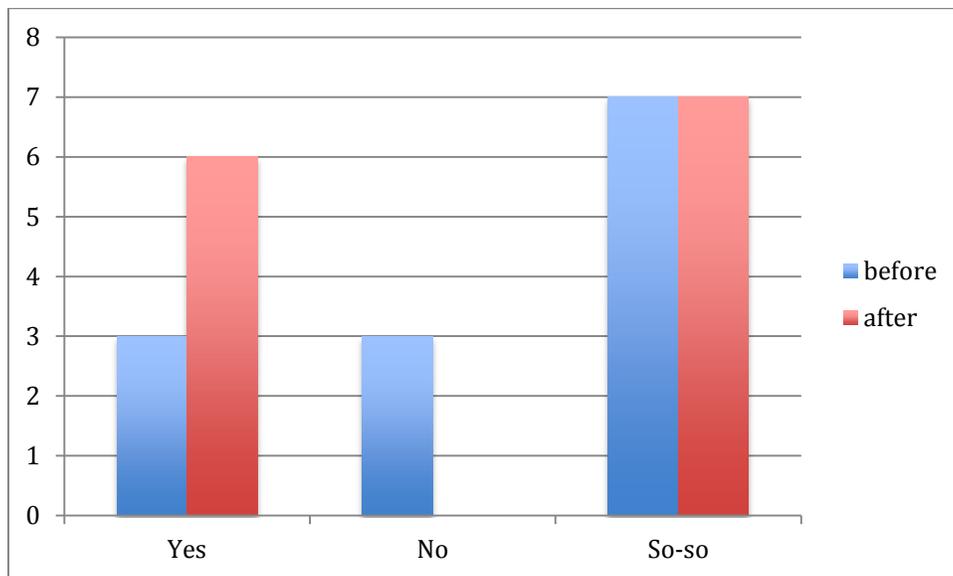

Figure 3. Comparison of whether the child thought of himself/herself a good

writer before and after project was implemented.

      The third question posed pre and post- project was "How do you feel when you

are writing?" Before the project many children had difficulty answering the question

and said that it depended what they were writing about. The one child who chose

"stressed" both before and after the project has a learning deficit in the area of the

mechanics of writing. That child told me that when writing for an assignment that he

didn't choose causes the stress. When working on the poem I typed some of the poem

while the child dictated and that alleviated some of the stress. That same child reported

being very "happy and proud" of the poem. After the project, the answer to the question

came much easier and in fact, many of the children found it hard to choose between

"good and fun" and "calm" or "in the zone." All of these outcomes were a movement

towards a positive feeling about writing rather than a negative feeling or just not

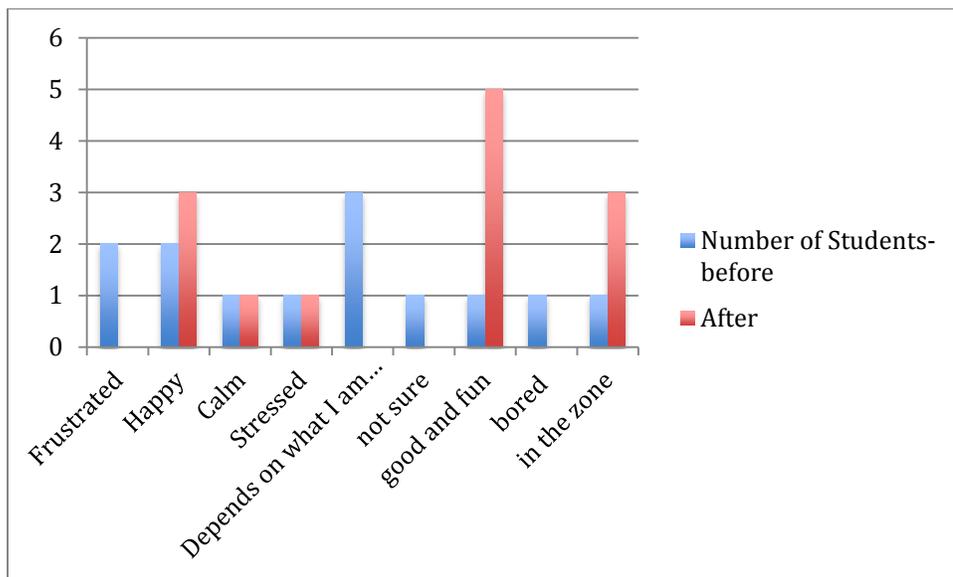knowing. The comparison of results is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Comparsion of how the child feels when writing before and after

project was implemented

After concluding the first lesson, I asked for feedback on the project. Most of the

children said that they felt that it was a challenging assignment, but "in a good way."

Many children reported feeling that they had accomplished something "big" and "hard."

All of the children indicated that they liked using the websites to look for words

because they found words "they had never heard of before" or " would not have been

able to find otherwise." Some of the children who chose rhyming poems said they didn't

think they would have been able to think of rhyming words or good rhyming words

without using the website rhymezone.com. One child reported that other children who

were not doing this assignment were very interested in finding out what he was doing.

Almost every child said that they enjoyed using the websites for the assignment.

After each writing assignment I graded the work using the rubric created for this

project. Overall the scores increased from the baseline-writing sample. In looking at the

results, I think that the reason for the decrease in some scores from the poetry

assignment to the small moment story assignment is because writing a story requires

more skills than writing a poem at this level. I think the process was worthwhile in that

many children found success with writing poetry, even those who typically find writing

of any sort challenging or difficult. I believe that the positive outcome of writing the

poem created confidence for tackling the process of writing a story. Therefore the

scores for the story were possibly higher than if we had not done the poetry lesson first.
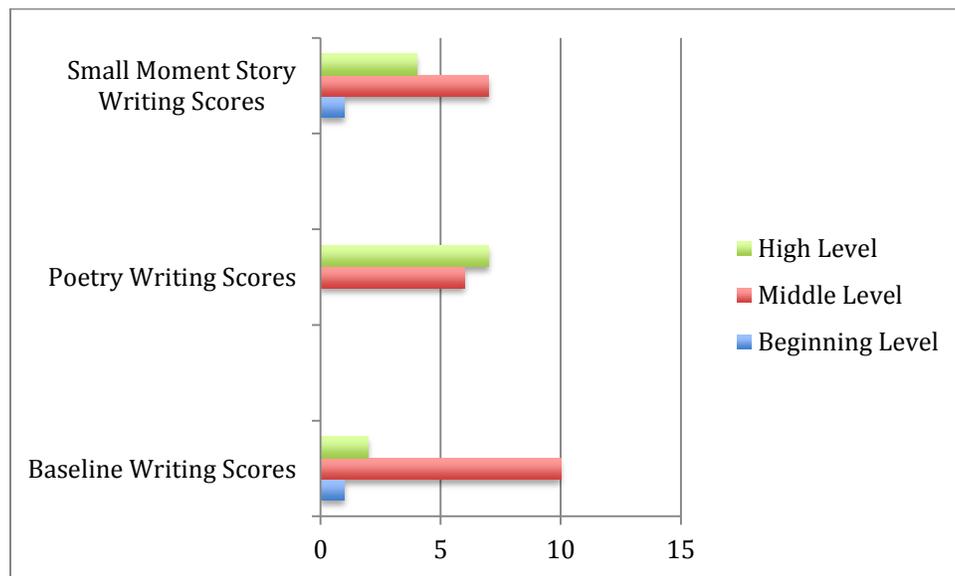
The results are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Writing scores for all three writing assignments given during the

project.

Action Plan

This project has led to interesting conclusions and new questions. One conclusion I have come to in doing this project is that children like to have choices in how they do their work. Technology and digital tools provide for many interesting and exciting choices for students to accomplish their goals. I have conducted this study in a Montessori classroom and see that the computer and its many resources can be used as a material just like the division beads or grammar boxes. Lessons can be given in a logical order to provide students with necessary computer skills according to their grade level. Laptops can be stored in a computer box or shelf, or desk-top computers can be set up throughout the room. Technology offers a wide range of resources and ways to do work. This doesn't mean that "the old school" ways are not useful or interesting to children. The feel of pencils, books, and paper are not lost on today's children. They just see them as some of the many wonderful tools in their toolbox.

After incorporating technology into the Writer's Workshop, the data shows that the writing scores increased, and engagement and enthusiasm for the work also increased. I also observed an increased ability of the students to assess their own writing. The data gathered shows that students enjoy having choices and variety of resources to use for writing assignments. I also believe that the more experience children have with technology and all of its affordances, many will tend to choose to use the technology. Most however, will choose a combination of technology and what I will call "paper tools" such as paper, pencil, actual books and dictionaries etc. Many students reported that they liked using pencil and paper to get their original ideas out and then

move to the computer. They also reported that sometimes it was just easier to get out a

dictionary than to wait for the computer to turn on and search the web for what they

are looking for. They had clear ideas about what tools and materials would work in

certain instances.

As a result of this research, I have become much more adept at using technology

and therefore feel more comfortable using it in the classroom. I am motivated to seek

out excellent digital tools for my students in all of the subjects that I teach as I see how

much it can enhance outcomes. Students today need to be ready for the technological

world that awaits them. I feel the responsibility to expose them to technology and how

it can be used to reach one's goals.

Some questions that came out of this process are:

1. Should Montessori training incorporate a technology album into the training?

2. Should technology be incorporated into all subjects taught in the classroom?

3. Is technology changing the way our brains work or the way we learn?

I am committed to adding meaningful digital tools to lessons and assignments in

my classroom. I will also continue to research and stay current with studies on

technology in the classroom and what is best practice for our student's learning. I also

hope that my colleagues will be inspired to find interesting and meaningful digital tools

to enhance their practices as well.

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Appendix A

Classroom Internet Contract

Classroom Internet Contract

When using the computer/internet:

1. I will follow the rules explained to me by school staff

2. I will demonstrate appropriate behavior.

3. I will be courteous to others and respect their documents and files.

4. I will use the equipment with care.

5. I will use only software that my teacher has assigned to me.

6. I will connect only to sites on the Internet that have been allowed by the teacher.

7. I understand that the computer systems have been set up for me and may not be changed in any way.

8. I will use only "school-appropriate" language, pictures, and other data on the computers or network. I will abide by any email instructions given to me by my teacher to protect me and to promote the health of our network.

9. I will follow the copyright laws that protect programs, data, books, and pictures.

10. I will tell the teacher about problems.

11. I will leave all materials, equipment, and parts in the lab or computer area so that the systems will be in good working order.

12. I will help to keep the lab or computer area clean and orderly by recycling unwanted paper, picking up personal items, etc. I will keep all food and liquids away from the computers.

13. I will have a teacher's permission for using the Internet, computer, or lab.

 I understand that if I violate these guidelines, my computer and network privileges may be suspended.

Signature of Student _____ Date _____
Signature of Parent_____ Date _____
Signature of Teacher_____ Date _____

Appendix B
Survey sent to Colleagues

Questionnaire for Colleagues- Technology and Writer's Workshop ARP form

1. **What do you think generally of the writing of the student's in our classroom?**
2. **Do you see any patterns of errors in our student's writing?**
3. **Do you enjoy using technology to give lessons?**
>
> Yes
> No
> Sometimes

4. **When you plan a lesson do you think of ways to incorporate technology?**
>
> Always
> Sometimes
> Never

5. **Do you see a difference in the quality of work when the students use technology?**
>
> Yes, a positive difference
> Yes, a negative difference
> No difference

6. **Do you see a difference in attitude or engagement when students use technology?**
>
> Yes, a positive difference
> Yes, a negative difference
> No difference

Appendix C

Rubric for Writer's Workshop Assignments- Stephanie Pullman Teacher
Student's Name _____
Assignment _____
Date_____

Criteria	High Level	Middle Level	Beg
Grammar and Punctuation	Language follows grammar and spelling rules fluently. Uses purposeful and varied sentence structures.	Language follows grammar and spelling rules somewhat fluently. Uses correct and varied sentence structure.	Use of gr rules are correct, structure
Content	Highly creative and unique ideas for assignment. Is easy to follow and flows throughout the piece.	Somewhat creative and unique ideas for assignment. Is somewhat hard to follow, flow is inconsistent.	New and emergen beginnin
Followed instructions for assignment	All of the criteria for assignment is present.	Most aspects of the assignment are present.	Some as assignme
Participation in Author's Chair	Volunteered to share work. Consistently used an audible voice, spoke clearly, and used expression to convey meaning.	Volunteered to share work, Used audible voice with some prompting needed, often used expression to convey meaning.	Read wo a soft vo sometim expressi when pr
Digital Fluency	Had confidence to use trial and error. Extend help to others. Used tools in innovative ways for assignment.	Sometimes tried to problem solve before asking for help. Discovered new features when prompted. Sometimes had confidence to use trial and error.	Often as attempti Confiden explore error.

Appendix D

Student Interview Questions

Questions for focus groups

1.What was your favorite writing activity in writer's workshop last year?

2. What was your least favorite writing activity in writer's workshop last year?

3. What is your favorite kind of writing to do?

4. What is the most difficult part of writing for you?

5. When you are writing how do you feel?

6. Do you think of yourself as a good writer?
a) If so, what makes you a good writer?
b) If not, why do you think you are not a good writer?

7. Do you like writing on the computer or with a paper and pencil better?

8. Is there anything you don't you like about working on the computer?

9. Do you think we should do more or less work on the computer in the classroom?

10. When do you think you work best? (Show of hands)
When:
you read about things,

use hands on materials,

talk to other people about ideas,

use the computer,

listen and watch

Appendix E

Observation Form

Observation Sheet for Writer's Workshop- Stephanie Pullman Teacher
Student's Name _____ Assignment _____
Date_____

Observations will be conducted twice a week for 6 weeks. There will be two groups- a fifth grade group and a 6th grade group. There are 4 girls and 3 boys in the 5th grade group. There is one girl and 3 boys in the 6th grade group. Each session will be 45 minutes. Each child will be observed each session.

Participates- asks questions	Yes No
Collaborates with other students	Yes No
Completes task on time	Yes No
Is able to complete task without teachers help	Yes No
Seems interested in assignment- engaged, motivated	Yes No
Volunteers to read in Author's Chair	Yes No
Other Notes	