

Supportive Technology Project:
Using StoryBird for Creative Writing

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One of the benefits of working at a small, private Catholic school is that I was able to decide what writing program would best meet the needs of my students while fulfilling our curriculum requirements. I spent a lot of time researching and reading through samples of various writing programs that would allow me to differentiate for the levels of writing ability that my students enter second grade with; I also spent a lot of time making sure that I would be using something that met the standards set forth by the Archdiocese of Detroit. While I do not have district assessments to give and benchmarks to meet, I still have a responsibility to make sure that my students learn, understand and are able to successfully apply essential writing skills and styles appropriate for second grade.

The writing program that I chose to implement in my classroom for the last three years is one that was researched, designed and tested by two professional teachers, both of whom spent many years teaching writing in grades Kindergarten through second grade. Their own classroom experience of writing instruction and assessment was very important to me. As most of us know, it can be exhausting to constantly try and think of new ways to “re-invent the wheel” when it comes to fun, engaging, standard-laden lessons. For me to be able to personally select a writing program that has been used, with great success, by other professional teachers was amazing!

I am beginning my memo with this background information so that you will be able to better understand why I decided to explore and test out Storybird with my second grade students this past week. There are many positive aspects to the writing program that I was fortunate enough to select, but I have found over the last three years that this writing program lacks one major part of lower elementary writing that I feel is essential: creative writing. Out of the eight units in my writing program, not one of them focuses on creative, imaginative, original writing. As I was exploring some of the options for this project, I read a discussion post where someone

mentioned a website called Storybird.com. Within a few minutes of checking out the website and reading a little bit more about it, I knew that it was going to be my focus for this project.

Storybird (2017) refers to their technology as “visual storytelling for everyone: a platform for writers, readers, and artists of all ages” in their About section. As I read more about Storybird, I discovered that anyone can create highly visual stories rather quickly because the artwork has already been done for them. Storybird curates artwork from artists and illustrators around the world, ranging from amateurs to professionals (2017). I was so excited to discover this feature because it is different from other story making websites and apps that I have tried with my students in the past. One of the areas that many of my students struggle with, or simply do not like when we are writing, is that of drawing illustrations. Some of my students do not like taking the time to draw illustrations and others feel they are not good enough artists and they end up worrying more about the illustrations rather than the words. Every year, both of these situations leave me with students who come to dread our writer’s workshop time. These students end up being the ones who have the hardest time getting started or thinking of something to write. Consequently, I spend a large chunk of time either helping them think of something to write or redirecting them to get back to work on something they may have already started.

I believe that, in general, most of my students enjoy our writing time and a few even tell me it is their favorite part of our day. But I want our writing time to be *all* of my students’ favorite time of day; I don’t want them to worry about not being a good artist or to rush through it just to get it done. When I introduced Storybird to my class this past Tuesday at the beginning of writer’s workshop, there was a mix of cheers and groans. Everything changed, though, when I showed them that all of the artwork was ready and waiting for them. I scrolled and clicked through five pages of colorful, intriguing and inspiring artwork and all of my students were in

silent awe. We use a lot of technology in my classroom (and school), so for all eighteen of them to be completely silent, with their mouths hanging open was quite a sight to see. Then, I showed them a picture book that I started working on the night before and modeled how they were going to be able to create their own picture books and write stories however they wanted them to be. They erupted in cheers and excited chatter and I knew in that moment that I had them hooked.

Storybird can be accessed and used on computers or iPads. I decided that it would be more beneficial for my students to use Storybird on a computer, so that they could practice their typing skills. Once we were all logged in at the computer lab, I let my students have free reign of the website. I usually lead them through step by step for things like this, but I did not want to detract from the high level of excitement and engagement in the room, so I let them figure it out as they went. I simply walked around the room, helping out students as needed and admiring the creative, imaginative and original stories they were coming up with. We spent 40 minutes in the computer lab on Tuesday and *all* eighteen of my students were actively engaged, typing away, selecting artwork that inspired them and happily sharing their work and ideas with their neighbors. It was a magical moment for sure!

We have gone back to the computer lab every other day this week and my students have absolutely loved being able to write their own stories, inspired by the artwork, their imaginations and each other. Aside from being able to write their own stories, another feature that we discovered is that students can leave comments on each other's work; the teacher can also comment as well, privately or publicly. When we went to the computer lab today, I decided to work on something new for myself and that was to read what my students were writing and leave them a comment that named something wonderful that I noticed them doing. According to Bomer (2010), "The particular words we use with our students to comment on their writing have

tremendous power and weight” (p. 18). All year long, I have used rubrics to provide my second grade students with feedback on their writing pieces and I think that some of these rubrics and all of their red marks and comments pointing out what was wrong or missing has affected a few students’ interest in writing.

My goal in writing my student’s comment and leaving them feedback on their Storybird writing was to avoid pointing out what was missing or what was wrong. Instead, I aimed to look and listen for and name things that were new, unique, different and original that my students were doing or writing. Bomer (2010) writes that “Teachers can help create kids who love to write and try to improve their writing by naming their hidden gems, their particular gifts as writers” (p. 18). As my students started reading the comments I left them today, many of them were beaming with pride, while others commented back or told me in person how happy they were I had noticed what they were writing or trying out.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend exploring Storybird yourself sometime this summer. I know that the school year is coming to a close and you might not have time to try it out with your own students this year, but it has opened up a whole new work of possibilities for creative writing for my students and I! Over four days this week, Storybird increased all of my students’ engagement and openness with writing; the format allows for them to easily test things out and play around with language, artwork and ideas. There are other ways that Storybird can be used aside from creative writing as well. The options for artwork are tremendous and there is something to fit every mood and style. There are also long form (chapter) book and poem formats for students to write. The possibilities are endless with Storybird! I hope that you will take some time to check it out and will be able to think of some way to use it in your own writing time in the future.

References

Bomer, K. (2010). *Hidden gems: naming and teaching from the brilliance in every students writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Storybird. (2017). Retrieved from <https://storybird.com/>.