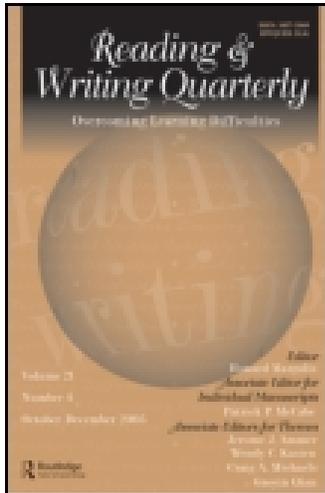


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Liqing Tao, David Reinking
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WINTER

ISSUES IN TECHNOLOGY

E-MAIL AND LITERACY EDUCATION

Liqing Tao

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY

David Reinking

University of Georgia, Athens, GA

E-MAIL IN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

We have for several years examined and monitored the relevant literature trying to get a comprehensive picture of what might be synthesized from research on use of e-mail (Tao, 1995; Tao, 1997; Tao & Reinking, 1998). Little of the e-mail research has been conducted by literacy researchers and relatively little has been published in mainstream literacy journals (see Kamil & Lane, 1998). A majority of studies deal directly with the use of e-mail as a classroom activity in relation to curricular goals from the elementary grades through college. In the following sections we briefly highlight some tentative conclusions that can be drawn from current research, providing a starting point for considering what e-mail may have to offer literacy educators.

E-mail Facilitates Positive Classroom Interactions

E-mail has been used successfully to facilitate discussion outside of regular classroom activities. This use sometimes enhances in-class

Address correspondence to Liqing Tao, School of Integrative Studies in Teacher Education, College of Education, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101, USA. E-mail: liqing.tao@wku.edu

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discussions as well (Collins, 1997; Hiltz, 1986). Marsh (1997) reported increased communication among ESL college students as the result of using e-mail. Students spontaneously used e-mail communication with each other even while the instructor was on vacation. In a study involving kindergartners, Durost and Hutchinson (1997) concluded that children made new friends via e-mail tasks which were supplemented by more traditional friend-making activities such as photo exchanges and field trips together.

E-mail seems to provide chances for learning literacy skills in two ways: (1) students interact socially and (2) they actively use literacy in meaningful ways. E-mail allows students to use language by getting to know new friends (Durost & Hutchinson, 1997), by obtaining cultural knowledge (Schwartz, 1990), and by finding out their own social roles and voices in class discussions (Fey, 1994; Marsh, 1997). A closely associated and important aspect of e-mail is that it can create an authentic situation for reading and writing. Such authentic experiences are motivating for learning important and relevant facts (Baugh & Baugh, 1997), and they can allow for immediate access to experts who can address specific concerns (Johnson, 1997).

E-mail Creates a More Democratic Context for Discussion

Some researchers have found that students who are usually shy and reserved in class discussions are more likely to participate in e-mail discussions. For example, Beach and Lundell (1998) analyzed online communication among junior high school students, then interviewed the students. They found that students tended to speak out more and feel less threatened in e-mail communication than in face-to-face conversation. Marsh (1997) reported ESL college students tended to overcome shyness and communicated on a variety of topics via e-mail.

E-mail Enhances Opportunities for Collaboration

E-mail has allowed collaborations among students, teachers, and researchers across time and space (Johnson, 1997; Marsh, 1997; Traw, 1994). For example, in a study described by Schwartz (1990), high school students and teachers from three geographically and ethnically diverse communities used e-mail to exchange their perspectives on different cultures and communities. They then went on to incorporate what they learned from e-mail exchanges into their writings. Johnson (1997) described the collaboration opportunities created by e-mail communication between preservice teachers in a reading

methods class and practicing teachers across the country. Preservice teachers were able to ask questions that concerned them in a non-threatening context. The students found such opportunities an important extension of their face-to-face field collaborations with practicing teachers.

E-mail Broadens Perspectives and Fosters Learning Development

By giving students easy access to individuals who may hold views and perspectives different from their own, e-mail provides many opportunities for students to evaluate their own views (Beach & Lundell, 1998; Johnson, 1997; Parson, 1997). Baugh and Baugh (1997) reported on third grade students using e-mail to communicate with other students across the country and around the world. Students expanded their understanding of other cultures and were able to correct some misconceptions they originally had. Garner and Gillingham (1996, 1998) also provided several case studies of classrooms illustrating how deeper cross-cultural understandings were fostered through e-mail communication. Preservice teachers in Wepner and Seminoff's (1997) study improved their lesson quality through the self-reflection enhanced by their e-mail communication with their instructors.

PROMISES OF E-MAIL FOR LITERACY EDUCATION

We have seen how the research on classroom e-mail communication has indicated positive effects on literacy development. Research also highlights some future potential applications of e-mail to literacy education.

E-mail Can Enhance Literacy Learning

A wide variety of learning experiences can be enhanced through e-mail communication. E-mail can bring the outside world into classrooms. As a result, students can be exposed to other cultures and broaden their perspectives. Communicating with other people, whether they are peers or experts, can be motivating when they are known to be listening and responding to one's e-mail. In addition, e-mail communication can provide students with opportunities for critical thinking and reflection. Because most e-mail is asynchronous, it provides students with the opportunity to think before replying.

Furthermore, e-mail communication keeps text present and allows for repeated readings if needed. Such characteristics of e-mail communication are conducive to reflective thinking in composing messages. Of particular relevance to literacy education, such reflective thinking tends to focus on the text as the means for inferring intention and shaping one's responses (Tao & Reinking, 1998). In that sense, traditional reading and writing skills as well as reflective thinking skills are central to the success of E-mail communication and are being honed and practiced.

E-mail Use Can Foster Technological Literacy

E-mail can provide students and teachers with the opportunity to become familiar with a mode of communication that is increasingly a part of what it means to be literate. With e-mail communication becoming a popular mode of communication today, e-mail use in classes can be an important part of efforts to prepare our students and teachers for tomorrow. Some efforts in this regard have been made in teacher education courses (Johnson, 1997; Souviney & Saferstein, 1997; Traw, 1994; Wepner & Seminoff, 1997). Most of the preservice teachers in these studies believed that they benefited from using e-mail. Immediate feedback and familiarity with computer use were two of the benefits reported. Given the increasing popularity and availability of the Internet, we think the classroom use of e-mail can also contribute to teachers' confidence in implementing and utilizing computer technology in classroom. Such confidence in technology implementation in turn will provide students further avenues for developing their own technological literacy.

In conclusion, e-mail communication has been demonstrated to have positive effects on students' learning and holds promising prospects for facilitating literacy education. However, future research will be needed to futher our understanding of the nature of effects e-mail applications in classrooms have on literacy education.

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