

Topic: Develop and use instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learners.

Olthouse, J. M., & Miller, M. T. (2012). Teaching talented writers with Web 2.0 tools. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 45*(2), 6-14.

## Context

Online writing networks become a curricular differentiation vehicle limiting students only by their interests and capabilities (Sheffield, 2007).

In an online writing community, new writers voluntarily participate in activities similar to those of published authors (i.e., writing, critiquing, revising, publishing, and promoting); and, they can interact with published authors by submitting questions and entering contests.

## Purpose of Study

This is a practical and descriptive study based on research indicating that to help students succeed in both school and life, teachers should offer a curriculum matched to students' skills and content knowledge and that when they do this, assignments are altered based on content, process, products, environments, and/or assessments (Winebrenner, 2000). The authors believe that online tools can help teachers match the writing curriculum to students' needs. They propose the use of these tools to help all students meet 21<sup>st</sup> century writing standards and to specifically support the needs of gifted writers. Web 2.0 writing tools are described in detail so that teachers and support staff working with gifted student writers can support and nurture their talents.

## Method

The authors described the characteristics of talented student writers and explained how to choose and use Web 2.0 writing tools, matching them to student characteristics and needs. A table presenting twelve elementary and secondary online resources for gifted and talented writers [see Appendix A] specified features of each resource and provided a scenario in which it might be used by a teacher.

The authors identified the specific characteristics of talented student writers that

can be supported and enhanced with wise use of online writing tools as:

1. Seeking out intellectual peers with similar talents (Kohanyi, 2005) and judging their writing against those of their peers and role models rather than against basic curriculum goals.
2. Possessing above average reading ability, broad reading interests, and rapid learning (Purto, 2002) that make them good candidates for learning more quickly by surfing through various writing websites than by following a predetermined curriculum sequence (Siegle, 2004).
3. Writing in new and varied formats (Olthouse and Miller, 2012) and using images and sound as well as text.

## Results

As Olthouse and Miller (p. 13) indicate,

“Using online tools, teachers can more easily differentiate opportunities for their talented writers. For example, general education classroom teachers can use a pretest and substitute method for using online resources with students who are talented writers. First, the student demonstrates what he or she already knows. Then, the teacher allows the student to skip over the homework and classroom practice that covers those skills. Finally, the teacher substitutes a project that is of interest to the student. Alternatively, students who have consistently demonstrated their ability to meet state competency requirements complete an independent study contract with their teacher. In an independent study, the teacher and the student agree ahead of time on behavioral guidelines, a final assessment, and check-in points along the way. The teacher sets up standards for how the

student will be evaluated and the product that is expected and then provides written documentation of these standards (Winebrenner, 2000).”

### Discussion

This article provides a clear description of the process of differentiating instruction and presents twelve online resources that can help teachers and support staff differentiate instruction in the area of writing. Often, teachers know that some students can skip over homework and classroom practice because they have met state competency requirements, but they do not have the resources to develop an independent study, to determine how students will be evaluated, and the product that is expected. Although online resources do not eliminate the need for teacher structure and guidance, they can help students with writing talent connect with other avid writers and can offer authentic motivational writing challenges such as contests and publication opportunities.

#### About Research-to-Practice Briefs

*Research-to-Practice Briefs* provide summaries of key studies that inform practice related to early childhood special education. The series is designed specifically to support community college faculty who prepare candidates to work with children with special needs in the early childhood setting.

#### About The ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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## Appendix A

Table of Resources			
Research	Focus	Features	Sample Assignment
Kidblog (Kidblog.org)	Elementary	Allows students to post short entries on current topics, and read and comment on their classmates' writings. Offers a "bare bones" platform, easy login, and allows teachers to moderate content—all for free, with no ads.	Mr. Wills wants to encourage all his students to write on a daily basis, and especially wants to encourage his best writers, Alicia and Elisa, to give each other feedback on their writing. He sets up blog accounts for all of his students, where they post online diary entries. He partners Alicia and Elisa together and asks them to post two questions and two comments on each others' blogs each week.
Glogster (Glogster.com)	Elementary	Students create online collages with a mix of photos, text, sound, and video. They can share their collages and comment on each others' work.	Susan is a first-grade student who loves to draw pictures and make crafts. She is also an excellent storyteller, but is slowed down by typing and handwriting. Her teacher helps her create a glog, which contains pictures and maps of her fantasy world, along with an audio clip of her telling an elaborate story.
Storybird (Storybird.com)	Elementary	Students create storybooks using preexisting illustrations. They can work with a partner to write their book, can comment on each others' books, and can print final copies.	Kevin is a first-grade student with a fifth-grade reading level, advanced vocabulary, and is comfortable with computers. His teacher wants him to practice writing longer, interconnected texts because his writing seems disjointed. Most of Kevin's classmates are still learning how to read picture books, and they do not write full sentences. Kevin and his buddy (a gifted student at another rural school in the county) work together to write storybooks online, using the images to provide continuity.
CTY (cty.jhu.edu) & EPGY (http://epgy.stanford.edu/)	Elementary and Secondary	Offers writing-intensive courses, detailed written feedback, and high level of analysis	Wayne is a fourth-grade student who likes to read classic war novels and history books. His parents are frustrated because most of the fourth-grade curriculum involves reading and comprehending storybooks, whereas Wayne is capable of analyzing literature and historical documents. They are willing to pay for Wayne to take an analytical writing course via CTY. Wayne will be able to get in-depth feedback about his writing each week from his online instructor.
WritingKid (www.fundsforwriters.com/writingkid.htm)	Secondary	E-mail newsletter that describes publication and contest opportunities for young writers.	Ms. Marquez has been impressed by some of her juniors' writings this year; she decides to subscribe to writingkid.com, and starts to use some of the contest opportunities to shape her writing assignments. Later in the year, three of her students proudly announce to her that they have been awarded scholarship monies as a result of entering some of the contests.
NaNoWriMo (NaNoWriMo.org)	Secondary	This site creates a positive peer pressure environment for writing a novel. Students can compete with each other for numbers of words written, and can discuss revising and editing on the forums. Teachers can track writers' progress and offer encouragement.	At a parent-teacher conference, middle school English teacher Mr. Wills is surprised to learn that one of his "C" students, Noelle, has been writing a novel in her spare time at home. Mr. Wills notes that most of Noel's poor grades are on grammar tests. Mr. Wills decides to give Noelle some extra credit for writing and editing the chapters of her novel. He tracks her progress on NaNoWriMo.org

Research	Focus	Features	Sample Assignment
Figment (Figment.com)	Secondary	Offers discussion groups, contests, news about recently released novels, Facebook updates, and social rewards (rankings and “likes”) for young writers.	Danielle really sticks out in her class. She always reads the assigned novels within the first week, whereas other students will only read the book if the teacher brings in an audio version for them to follow along. Danielle has realized that it is not cool to like reading in her middle-school classroom, so she has started to hide her interest and has stopped doing homework. Danielle’s teacher decides to give her the extra class time that most of the students spend listening to the audiobooks, and encourage her to discuss her favorite books on figment.com. Danielle learns that there are many other students who are as excited about reading and writing as she is, and a couple other students in Danielle’s class start finishing their books early so that they can “play on the computer” as well.
Teenink (Teenink.com)	Secondary	On TeenInk, students can publish nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, both on the web site, and in a national print magazine.	George writes some of the best book reviews in his class, often offering analysis of Nobel-prize winning works that no other middle school students are reading. His teacher is always disappointed to see George throw these handwritten book review assignments in the trash can each month after he glances at his grade. The gifted education specialist suggests that the teacher require all the students to choose one written work each semester to submit to an online publication such as TeenInk. When George’s book review is accepted on TeenInk, he shows much more pride in his accomplishment than he did just from getting an A on the assignment.
Self-publishing	Secondary (and teachers)	Hard-copy and e-book publication opportunities; books can be sold all over the world.	“This is science class; why do you care about our writing?” complain Mr. Kline’s students. Mr. Kline has heard this complaint ever since he started asking students to write reports about endangered animals. Mr. Kline decides students would be more interested in science writing if they have an audience and a market. Mr. Kline’s eighth-grade class decides to write a book for upper elementary students. They publish their book as an e-book and as a hard-copy book to sell at the school book fair. They use the money they earn from sales of the book to go on a field trip to the zoo.
Wattpad (Wattpad.com)	Secondary (and teachers)	Students can write and read stories on their iPad, and promote their writing on other sites.	Chris’s teacher suggested he post some of his novels on Figment.com, but he said this web site was too geared towards “middle-school girls.” He wants to see his crime novel compete with adult authors. He decides to publish his story on Wattpad.com, where he can write on the go on his iPad.
Pbworks (Pbworks.com)	Secondary (and teachers)	Offers collaborative web page design with teacher controls. Teachers can track individual students’ contributions to the online documents.	Mr. See wants to create a class web page so parents can read students’ works, but he also wants to be able to edit the web page and give individual students credit for their unique contributions. Mr. See appoints two of his best writers as editors and allows them to work together to design the class webzine.
Qiqqa (Quippa.com)	Secondary (and teachers)	Writers can store multiple PDF academic journal articles online and annotate these articles. They can save quotations and notes, and they can easily import and format citations.	Mrs. Chen is an AP history teacher who knows that, although her students are good at writing short analyses, they struggle when they have to write longer papers in college. She shows them how to download academic articles from Google Scholar, organize their articles on Qiqqa.com, organize their notes, and import citations into Microsoft Word, all for free.

Note. CTY=Center for Talented Youth; EPGY=Educational Program for Gifted Youth; NaNoWriMo=National Novel Writing Month.

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Source. Table 1. Online Resources for Talented/Gifted Writers, pp. 9-10.