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MIDSOUTH LITERACY JOURNAL

The University of Alabama at Birmingham, in partnership with The MidSouth Reading/Writing Institute, has established this peer-reviewed online journal, *The MidSouth Literacy Journal* (MLJ). This new online, peer-reviewed journal is dedicated to disseminating and extending scholarship through original research and practice articles in literacy education. MLJ highlights constructivist-based literacy theory and practice that places the child at the center of the learning process and furthers the legacy of Dr. Maryann Manning. Each journal features a focus on teachers' perspectives about issues in the field along with contemporary releases in children's literature. Utilizing a combination of real-world classroom applications and concrete theoretical framework, the journal provides bi-yearly publications each fall and spring.

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CONTENTS

Dr. Maryann Manning's achievements were significant, the products of her boundless energy, unfaltering determination and deep commitment to children. Dr. Manning's footprint can be seen in the many projects that the UAB School of Education is known for today. Dr. Manning authored numerous books, book chapters, monographs, and articles that have guided and inspired educators throughout Alabama and beyond. Organizations around the world esteemed her with awards and accolades. She was particularly honored and excited to serve as a future president of the International Reading Association. At the time of her death, she was working at a literacy conference in Indonesia, doing what she loved.

Overview of Issue

The manuscripts chosen for this sixth issue of *The MidSouth Literacy Journal* encourage literacy leaders and educators at all levels to critically examine instructional techniques within the digital learning environment. Experts have defined digital literacy as an individual's ability to use digital tools systematically and proficiently (Reder, 2015; Sharp, 2017). The growing emphasis on authentic inclusion of technology within the learning environment is in sharp contrast to the limited amount of research currently identifying effective digital practices. The featured articles add to this growing area of research and invite dialogue about effective online teaching practices.

The first article, *Creating and Cultivating Ubiquitous Learning Environments,* explores the 21st century classroom. The article describes devices that support and promote individualized learning thereby allowing teachers greater flexibility in meeting the actual needs of the learner. The authors begin with the apparent disconnect between authentic, daily use of technology and decontextualized classroom uses. After identifying the current research on the use of technology for educational purposes, they address the standards for identifying high-quality digital learning practices and provide a wealth of technology resources for achieving the identified standards. The article closes with a brief look at effective professional development opportunities to scaffold classroom teachers towards digital best practices.

The second article, *Views towards an Online Peer Feedback Writing Task among Graduate-Level Students,* depicts an opportunity for professional development within an online learning environment with adult learners. This qualitative study examines the effects of online peer feedback for developing learner-centered digital teaching practices. Analysis of graduate student surveys revealed four distinct categories related to their experiences with online peer feedback writing tasks. The article ends with specific implications for promoting online teaching practices centered on the learner within the digital learning environment.

The authors who contributed to this issue examined the challenges surrounding authentic learning opportunities within the digital learning environment. Beginning with a critical evaluation of how teachers are currently using technology in the classroom setting is one recommendation for advancing online teaching practices. Engaging educators in firsthand digital learning experiences at the graduate level is a specific example of a professional development opportunity to help teachers transition to contextualized uses of technology that promote individualized student learning. We are hopeful that articles will stimulate discussion and further consideration of innovative digital practices within the online learning environment.

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Creating and Cultivating Ubiquitous Learning Environments

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In the 21st century classroom, the need for a ubiquitous environment centered around technology is more than apparent. Today's youth have never known a time when they did not have some type of device. Technology is the key in developing a ubiquitous learning environment in a 21st century classroom. Learning can happen anywhere and anytime in today's world with hand held devices. With this in mind, technology should be transforming the way we teach. Daily interaction with various devices offers flexibility to adapt lessons to student learning styles

Keywords: ubiquitous, learning environment, engagement, device

Ubiquitous Environment

In the 21st century classroom, the need for a ubiquitous environment centered around technology is more than apparent. People today use technology (i.e., iPads, iPods, iPhones, laptops) as if it were an extension of their bodies. Technology is seamlessly ingrained in our society and our culture. Today's youth have never known a time when they did not have some type of device. Alvermann (2011) postulated "young people between 8-18 years of age are spending an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes daily (7 days a week) using media that portray meaning through images, sounds, icons, gestures, language, performances, and other multimodal forms of communication" (p. 4). If you also take into consideration that many young people are capable of multitasking (i.e., instant messaging, checking Facebook, writing blogs, creating videos) the combined amount of time spent online can easily increase to approximately 11 hours daily. Compare this to the average amount of time young people spend reading print media, "books (25 minutes a day), magazines (9 minutes a day), and newspapers (3 minutes a day)" (Alvermann, 2011, p. 5), and it is obvious that students are motivated and continuously connected to technology.

Expecting a student who is so engrossed in technology to sit through a lecture or even perhaps sit still long enough to read the great American novel is unrealistic. Today's world is fast-paced. The information of the world is literally at their fingertips and the vast amount of resources available on the Internet is mind-boggling. Not only are students' consumers of what is

on the Internet, but they are producers of content as well (Alvermann, 2011). Students are actively engaged in social media. They are making videos, publishing websites, adding content to YouTube and Facebook at an alarming rate, and they are doing it simultaneously through multitasking. It only makes sense, then, that educators need to not only understand a ubiquitous environment but also create a ubiquitous learning environment in which students can create and learn literacy in a manner in which they have grown accustomed – through social networking and technology. Alvermann (2011) further advanced these claims stating "there is research to suggest that teachers who make links to students' out-of-school experiences increase motivation and success in school learning" (p. 5).

Ubiquitous Technology

Technology is the key to developing a ubiquitous learning environment in a 21st century classroom. Learning can happen anywhere-anytime in today's society with handheld devices. With this in mind, technology should be used to transform the way we teach and learn. Daily interactions with various devices offer flexibility to adapt learning to meet the needs of students. Often student interest and motivation are piqued by the quick access to information that technology provides. During a recent observation, a first-grade student found a caterpillar on the sidewalk during recess. She quickly asked her teacher if she could bring it back to the classroom for observation. As soon as she got the caterpillar settled into the new environment she used her iPad to research information about the caterpillar. The student had immediate access to what type of caterpillar it was, what it eats, where it lives, and more. Throughout their time in the classroom students took time-stamped photographs of the caterpillar and added stories to the photos to document growth and development (aka lifecycle). This learning opportunity provided real-world connections and learning experiences for the student and her classmates. This exploratory task was integrated into science, reading, and writing activities throughout the day/week. Frequently, these activities integrated communication as students communicated with each other and the teacher about the task, creativity as students captured real-time photos of the lifecycle, collaboration through the creation of their own lifecycle books, and critical thinking as they added their voice to the story of the lifecycle of the caterpillar.

The concept of teaching has to change to create a ubiquitous learning environment. Educators cannot use technology infrequently, in decontextualized ways and expect students to make significant gains in learning (Cardullo, Zygouris-Coe, & Wilson, 2014). It has to be used every day intentionally. "Adding digital devices without a fundamental change in the culture of teaching and learning will not create a ubiquitous environment. Fundamental changes require clear goals that are aligned with curriculum, content, and instructional purposes" (Cardullo et al., 2014, p. 5).

Current Research Findings

Information continues to expand because of globalization and readily available access to data. As other areas of the professional world seem to be embracing change and adopting new ideas, educators seem to be struggling to make these changes in the classroom (Crichton, 2014). Technology is modifying the way we look at the world and education today. In order to meet the needs of all students, educators must create classrooms that make technology available, purposeful, and relevant. Educational programs and schools are finding creative and rigorous

ways to effectively teach students how to become readers who can learn anytime and anywhere through the use of technology.

Students are attached to technology 24/7, yet how do we create a ubiquitous culture that utilizes technology for academic learning? According to Wilson, Zygouris-Coe, and Cardullo (2014) "new initiatives must ensure that technology is viewed as an integral part of the curriculum and not just simply an add-on. The issue is not the narrow one of how to fit technology into education but the broader one of how to transform education to meet changing technologies" (p. 103). Many schools have created designated computer lab spaces in which students have their weekly schedule or go to the labs at specified times to complete assessments, play learning games, work on classroom assignments, take mandate state assessments, or work on special projects: this, however, is not a ubiquitous environment. In order to create a ubiquitous learning environment technology must be integrated into the classroom seamlessly and effortlessly on a daily basis.

According to the Digital Learning Council (2010), there are 10 elements of high-quality digital learning environments. These 10 elements can be aligned to create a ubiquitous learning environment for all students (see Table 1).

Table 1
Ten Elements of High-quality Digital Learning Environments

Student Eligibility	All students have a right to a high-quality education. In the 21st century, a high-quality education must include digital learning. Students who are eligible for public school should be eligible for publicly funded digital learning.
Student Access	Digital learning opens the virtual door to a high-quality education.
Personalized Learning	Digital learning allows for an individualized educational experience.
Advancement	Digital learning offers the potential for students to study at their own pace and advance based upon competency and mastery of the material — it is student-centered, not school-centered.
Quality Content	All digital content and instruction must be aligned with state standards or Common Core State Standards.
Quality Instruction	Breaking down the barriers to digital instruction can improve the quality of education while at the same time reduce costs. Teachers can serve students across the state or nation from one location.
Quality Choices	All students have access to multiple high-quality digital providers.
Assessment and Accountability	Student learning is the metric for evaluating the quality of content and instruction.
Funding	Funding creates incentives for performance, options, and innovation.
Delivery	Infrastructure supports digital learning.

Note. Modified and adapted from Foundation for Excellence in Education.

First, all students have a right to digital access. If *all* students do not have access, then it is not a ubiquitous environment. Digital learning should be high-quality and students should be offered opportunities to learn how to bridge digital literacies in and outside the classroom. In addition, digital learning must be carefully aligned with Common Core State Standards. To develop a

ubiquitous learning environment, teachers need to first determine what their learning objectives are and then how these objectives can be enhanced through the use of technology. The teacher's role has shifted from the dispenser of knowledge to facilitator of inquiry-based learning; therefore, pedagogical decisions have changed as well.

The integration of technology should be meaningful with the development of creativity/creation, consumption, curation, connection, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. If technology integration is not meaningful, then teachers run the risk of doing technology-based projects just to say they have added technology. According to Berk (2010), teachers can implement many technological strategies into their classrooms. Teachers can incorporate technology into lectures using video clips, music, blogs, and wikis. Teachers can utilize students' search engine skills, by giving assignments that will build quality searches and evaluation of authoritative voice. In addition, teachers can provide students with opportunities to contribute to websites, write their own blogs, microblogs, and wikis, as well as create YouTube videos, podcasts, and video casts with appropriate content. Having students create content using tools and applications such as YouTube videos for social studies and science is one way to put their video skills to use while assessing their knowledge of content. Students are engaged in social media throughout the day, so it only makes sense for them to work collaboratively in the classroom with technology meaningfully embedded to further their learning experience.

Maintaining Instructional Integrity

If teachers are going to incorporate technology seamlessly in the classrooms, how do they maintain instructional integrity? That is to say, how do teachers ensure they are meeting the standards and sound pedagogy through technology? To accomplish these goals, teachers can begin with Common Core State Standards. “Technology must be embedded strategically within a cohesive, evidence-based foundation strongly correlated to content and connected to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to avoid using technology for the sake of technology” (Cardullo et al., 2014, p 23). The following is a sequence of strategies teachers can use to develop a ubiquitous learning environment: (1) locate and identify state standards or Common Core State Standards; (2) align state or core standards with technology standards; (3) develop goals and objectives that align high-quality digital learning with technology standards; (4) assess the quality of the instruction, quality of the choices students have to complete the task and, most importantly, the quality of the content; and (5) evaluate the level to which technology has been implemented. Teachers should ask themselves if they have substituted, augmented, modified, or redefined the level of technology integration (Puentedura, 2006).

According to Berk (2010), teachers cannot assume that students are going to know how to use the technology needed to complete the curriculum:

> Just because this generation of students grew up with the technology and all of the tools of the digital age doesn’t mean that throwing technology at them in the classroom will automatically result in effective teaching and their learning. You need to understand how they use technology and how they think before systematically applying technology in your classroom. In other words, collect intelligence information (aka ―intel) on your students so you can match technology tools to their characteristics. (p. 2)

At the beginning of the school year, teachers should assess the tools that are available for learning, such as technology and metacognitive learning strategies. The i-MARSI (iPad-Metacognitive Awareness Reading Strategies Inventory is a self-reporting survey tool which can

aid in the identification of metacognitive digital strategies used by students to enhance learning and understanding (Cardullo, Wilson, & Zygouris-Coe, 2016).

In order to maintain instructional integrity, assessment of student learning has to be authentic. Multiliteracies assessments should not be an add-on to the curriculum or task but rather an integral part of an existing pedagogy of multiliteracies, merging the old with the new skills taught (Jacobs, 2013). According to a recent study by Hung, Chiu, and Yeh (2013), "New literacy practices require teachers to develop new assessment practices" (p. 401). As multiliteracies change, so should assessment. A pedagogy of multiliteracies is theoretically different from the cognitive approach that dominates assessment and requires a different way of thinking about texts and assessment (Jacobs, 2013). Assessing new literacies means teachers will need training and professional development to help expand their view of assessments. New tools and assessments will need to be developed.

While there are many approaches to assessing new literacies, a good place to start is with the following: (a) project assessment to measure in-depth tasks, (b) performance assessment to measure the creative process, (c) group assessment to measure collaborative skills, and (d) portfolio assessment to document the student's body of works (Jacobs, 2013). Teachers will be assessing not only content, but student performance, creativity, ease of use, social interaction with others, and finished products. Therefore, a simple rubric may not suffice. Assessments will not be the same for every project because new literacies require a different set of skills and sub-skills. Students will also need to be involved in the assessment process. For example, a good activity for student involvement is to have them assess multiliteracies before beginning the project. Having students decide beforehand what constitutes a good website, blog, YouTube video, etc., can help them understand not only the assessment process but also what is required to create meaningful content. Assessments will change with the project, but the integrity and authenticity of the type of assessment should remain consistent.

Creating a Ubiquitous Environment

Educators can implement digital storytelling into their reading curriculum to allow for new opportunities in reading comprehension. Digital storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools, like images, sound, and video, to create stories. Students today consume information through popular websites like YouTube to obtain information; digital storytelling connects students to the ways in which they enjoy learning daily (Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011). Educators can create their own stories to share with students as they introduce and explore new concepts in reading and other subjects. With previous instruction, students can also create digital stories for assignments. Older students could complete research and choose a particular point of view. Younger students can complete an assignment by retelling a story or read a story aloud to practice fluency. Researchers have shown that digital storytelling supports student understanding of all subject area knowledge as well as growth in higher order thinking, reflective thinking, and social language (Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011). When digital storytelling is used by students, it provides a strong foundation in many different types of literacy, including information literacy, visual literacy, technological literacy, and media literacy (Brown, J., Bryan, & Brown, T., 2005) thus creating a ubiquitous environment.

Many classroom teachers are turning to eReaders and eResponding to increase involvement and excitement in literacy instruction. eReaders range from tablets like the Nook and Kindle to apps on devices like the iPad. These apps allow users to download and read books

straight from their device. This technology also offers a variety of tools that allow users to highlight/underline text, type notes, and look up unfamiliar words (Larson, 2014). Larson's (2014) study findings suggested that digital-reading devices promoted new literacy practices and allowed readers to be more engaged in the text. Teachers can examine student annotations and notes to gain insight into a reader's comprehension skills to guide instruction. Once a book is downloaded it does not access the Internet, so students can easily continue reading and annotating as they read anywhere-anytime.

Teachers can set up class reading discussion boards, using eResponding, to allow students to share their thinking about reading. There are several online resources that make setting up discussion boards easy for teachers, including Kidblog, Wikispaces, Edmodo, and, Classchatter. Teachers have the opportunity to make these discussions available 24/7. If a student is reading at home, he/she can log in and easily post something from the class reading. Online discussion boards can seem less intimidating to students who normally would not speak up during a traditional small group setting (Webber, 2014). eReaders and eResponding make literacy groups possible even outside of the classroom, supporting anytime, anywhere learning.

Student support and scaffolding are critical, and Assistive Technologies (AT) are tools used to increase, maintain, or improve student capabilities. There are a variety of tools (low tech, mid-tech, and high tech) that can meet the specific needs of individual students (Ruffin, 2012). The benefits of AT for struggling readers are promising. Research with children and youth with disabilities suggest the following: (1) assistive technologies are empowering aids, (2) AT helps individuals compensate when remediation problems persist, and (3) AT promotes independence, decreases reliance on others, and enables children with disabilities to learn those skills of independence and self-sufficiency (Hasselbring & Bausch, 2006). ATs are one example of the technology tools teachers need in the classroom to meet the needs of all learners. These are only a few of the many ways to implement technology for a ubiquitous reading environment.

Professional Development

A critical part of creating a ubiquitous learning environment is providing teachers with professional development on how to use new technology for educational purposes. Professional development deepens teachers' understanding of the teaching/learning process as well as the students they teach. For professional development to be effective, it must involve teachers as both learners and teachers, allowing them to struggle with the uncertainties that accompany each role (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006). Because many teachers have not grown up with the technology available to students in their class, professional development in technology is a way for teachers to feel better equipped to instruct with the new tools available to them. Changes in teaching practice are tied to increased knowledge in skills. (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006). Therefore, for teachers to change their teaching habits they must be knowledgeable in the new skills they are acquiring. If a teacher does not feel in control of the class because they do not know how to use technology with ease, teachers will not be inclined to use it. It is obviously not in the best interest of the students for teachers to shy away from technology. Therefore, training for teachers should be part of professional development, especially as education continues to move toward web-based learning.

Currently, the education system is moving in a direction to increase and speed up the process of adopting "equitable" digital learning through Leading Education by Advancing Digital (LEAD). LEAD has released a five-point blueprint for federal and local sectors to adopt

in schools. First, LEAD seeks to address the infrastructure problems in schools by updating the wiring system. Many schools cannot support the amount of bandwidth it would take to support ubiquitous technology. Second, LEAD seeks to build a national effort to deploy devices in schools. Many schools have made efforts through programs like Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), and others are continuing in their footsteps. Third, LEAD proposes accelerating the adoption of digital curriculum. This requires schools to look for and evaluate programs that have positive technological aspects and other innovative classroom curriculum (LEAD, 2013). Fourth, LEAD recommends embracing model schools, like New York's iZone, Rocketship Academy and KIPP Empower Academy (Cardullo, Wilson, & Zygouris-Coe, 2015). We have much to learn from these great schools, just like we would with any other leading program models in education. Fifth, LEAD proposes investing in human capital. Teachers need to be educated on how to properly implement technology in the classroom through high-quality professional development (LEAD, 2013). We cannot simply teach students to become lifelong learners; we have to model it ourselves.

A ubiquitous learning environment is not created with merely the presence of technology. Students must be motivated to use technology to become more knowledgeable. How do teachers grab and keep students' attention? The ARCS Model of Motivational Design outlines four steps for promoting and sustaining motivation in the learning process: Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction (ARCS) (Calimag et al., 2014).

Keller (1988) identified the following three ways to grab a student's attention:

1. Perceptual arousal: Using surprise or uncertain situations;
2. Inquiry arousal: Offering challenging questions or problems to solve; and
3. Variability: Using a variety of resources and methods for teaching.

Students must also see the relevance to their learning experience by connecting learning to goals. A teacher can do this by providing students with choices or matching content to student skills. Once students believe success is achievable they will put forth an effort to meet their objectives, which will give them the confidence to meet their individual goals as well. For a student to continue to be motivated throughout the learning experience they must be satisfied with the results.

Teacher-student interaction is crucial for the learning environment to be effective. Technology should be used to enhance interaction and communication when teachers and students are having discussions, brainstorming, problem-solving, collaborating and reflecting (Leu et al., 2009). Technology should be used to pique student interest in a subject matter. Only then does the teacher become a facilitator, teaching students to use different technological devices to learn about the subject matter. A teacher's attitude towards technology is important in a ubiquitous learning environment. If a teacher has a positive attitude about using technology to develop learning, students will follow suit.

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Views towards an Online Peer Feedback Writing Task among Graduate-level Students

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The popularity of online learning has necessitated the development of online teaching practices that utilize effective learner-centered techniques. One recommended practice, online peer feedback, has been characterized as a valuable literacy- and digitally-based learning activity when coupled with writing tasks. Since existing literature has presented conflicting views of this learning activity, the purpose of the current study was to further investigate the views of graduate students who completed an online peer feedback writing task. The current study utilized a qualitative survey research design among 27 graduate students. Data were analyzed using a three-level classification diversity analysis procedure, which resulted in the identification of four categories: Challenges Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, Types of Feedback during the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, Benefits Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, and Processes for the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task. Supportive statements for each category were provided and then followed by a discussion that delineated three implications for online instructors. Limitations of the current study were also identified, as well as how they may be addressed through future research efforts.

Keywords: online peer feedback, writing tasks, digital literacy, graduate students

Introduction

The ubiquity of digital technologies has transformed postsecondary teaching and learning in the United States. According to the most recently available statistics, more than one-fourth of undergraduate students (28%) and one-third of graduate students (33%) have taken one or more online courses in their degree programs (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Additionally, year-to-year trends have demonstrated steady annual increases for online course enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2017). The demand and popularity of online learning has greatly impacted postsecondary faculty in all disciplines who are accustomed to teaching students in face-to-face settings (Rogers, 2000). Faculty members who teach online have recognized that they must "alter their teaching styles used within their 'traditional classroom,' and embrace new skills to effectively reach the distant learners" (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010, p. 537).

Considerable scholarly literature has identified a number of best practices for online teaching and learning within postsecondary contexts (e.g., Baran, Correia, Thompson, 2011; Bennett, Agostinho, & Lockyer, 2015; Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Sun & Chen, 2016; Young, 2010). One recommended practice, peer feedback writing tasks, has been characterized by postsecondary students as a valuable interactive learning activity that promotes the "development of robust knowledge" and heightens transference of knowledge to authentic contexts (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016, p. 168). However, postsecondary students have also

acknowledged potential hindrances and shortcomings with online peer feedback writing tasks (Mulder, Pearce, & Baik, 2014). These conflicting views call into question the value of this literacy- and digitally-based learning activity and highlight the need for further research with online peer feedback writing tasks.

As online teaching and learning in postsecondary contexts continues to expand, it is of great importance to identify specific teaching practices that promote student success. The purpose of the current study was to further investigate the use of online peer feedback writing tasks among the level of postsecondary students with the largest percentage of online course enrollment: graduate students. To achieve this purpose, graduate students were first exposed to an online peer feedback writing task and immediately thereafter were invited to complete a survey with which to share their experiences and perspectives. Results from the current study contribute to extant scholarly literature concerning online peer feedback writing tasks by providing additional insights regarding how learners view this online teaching practice.

Review of Literature

The following review of literature provides an overview of peer feedback and how it has been coupled with writing tasks in online learning environments. This review also examines reported advantages and disadvantages of online peer feedback writing tasks.

Overview of Peer Feedback

Peer feedback (also referred to as "peer assessment" or "peer review") is a process where students evaluate the work of their peers and appraise the quality based on a set of criteria (Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). Peer feedback learning activities are often designed in such a way that students create an initial draft version of a writing assignment, exchange drafts with a peer, and provide each other with constructive feedback. Students then use the feedback they received on their draft to improve the quality of their own work and create a final version of the writing assignment.

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is one of "the most critical influences" on student performance (p. 102). However, feedback by itself does not enhance performance—it must be structured as a vehicle for learning and address erroneous understandings. Peer feedback has been likened as a beneficial collaborative learning activity for writing tasks (van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006). As students review the writing of their peers and provide them with feedback, they simultaneously develop the ability to self-assess their own writing. Use of peer feedback learning activities also provides students with access to greater quantities of feedback in a timelier manner than a single course instructor is capable of providing.

Online Peer Feedback Writing Tasks

The use of online peer feedback writing tasks in postsecondary contexts has been well-documented (e.g., Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2014; van der Pol, van den Berg, Admiraal, & Simons, 2008). Course instructors have designed online peer feedback writing tasks using digital tools to facilitate interactive peer-to-peer reviews of collectively constructed writings (Mulder et al., 2014; van der Pol et al., 2008) and individually constructed writings (Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2014; van der Pol et al., 2008). Students who have participated in online peer feedback writing tasks have reported several benefits. For example, students shared that

receiving peer feedback on their writing was an excellent way to identify specific areas that needed improvement (Nicol et al., 2014). Peer feedback received often led students to add additional information or revise their writing to be more specific. Students also noted that the most helpful feedback consisted of "concrete suggestions for revisions," which encompassed recommendations that led them to make specific modifications in their writing (van der Pol et al., 2008, p. 1814). Furthermore, students acknowledged reciprocal benefits associated with giving and receiving peer feedback (Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2014). Students noted that while evaluating the writing of peers and constructing comprehensive feedback for them, they themselves recognized ways in which their own writing could be improved.

In contrast, students have also articulated disadvantages associated with online peer feedback writing tasks. Although many students disclosed positive attitudes towards such learning activities, some students revealed contradictory attitudes (Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2014; van der Pol et al., 2008). Student attitudes towards peer feedback were largely influenced by variations with the quality of feedback received. For example, when students received multiple peer reviews with conflicting feedback or peer reviews that had little helpful feedback, they quickly became dissatisfied and frustrated with the peer feedback process (Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The current study was grounded in understandings related to sociocultural learning theories. Sociocultural learning theories have posited that the construction of knowledge capitalizes upon the "dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). Socially, learning environments should be active spaces that promote social interactions among learners (Vygotsky, 1962), whereas individually, each learner possesses a unique culture that has been shaped by their own experiences, language, and skills (Vygotsky, 1978). As individuals collaborate, communicate, and interact with each other, knowledge is co-constructed and internalized (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative survey research design was utilized in the current study (Jansen, 2010). This research design was selected to elicit personal responses concerning the diverse experiences and views with an online peer feedback writing task among graduate students. By doing so, the researcher, who was also the course instructor, was able to administer the survey efficiently among respondents who, as online graduate students, spanned a wide geographic area (Phellas, Bloch, & Seale, 2012). Moreover, this research design helped establish validity with findings by reducing researcher bias and enhancing anonymity among respondents.

Context

The current study took place in a graduate-level course entitled Education Research, which was a required core course for all degree-seeking graduate students enrolled in programs offered in the education department at a public regional university located in the South Central part of the United States. The course content focused on research techniques in education settings, which were commonly new and unfamiliar concepts among students. Course content was delivered via the Blackboard learning management system (LMS) through seven different

modules, and each module included two graded course requirements: a small group collaborative task and an individual writing task. At the beginning of each semester, the course instructor subdivided all students enrolled in the course into three different small groups.

With each small group collaborative task, students engaged in interactive dialogue and provided each other with feedback using the following digital tools: asynchronous discussions, blogs, microblog messaging, and wikis (see Table 1). The intent of these course requirements was to foster collaborative understandings and familiarity among small group members. After participating in a small group collaborative task, students then completed an individual writing task to demonstrate their own competency with respective module content. Students received comprehensive feedback from the course instructor on each of their individual writings, which served a dual purpose: (1) to provide students with helpful feedback that noted areas of strength, as well as areas needing improvement; and (2) to model how to provide helpful feedback.

Table 1
Description of Digital Tools Used During Small Group Collaborative Tasks

Digital Tool	Description
Asynchronous Discussions	Asynchronous discussions took place within the Blackboard LMS in a discussion board forum (Blackboard Help, 2018a). In the discussion board forum, students created threads to make original postings and reply to the postings of peers.
Blogs	Blogs were online journals housed within the Blackboard LMS (Blackboard Help, 2018b). Students expressed their ideas in original blog entries and used the commenting feature to respond to the blog entries of peers.
Microblog Messaging	Microblog messaging took place on Twitter, an online social networking site (Twitter Inc., 2018). Students composed original tweets and replied to the tweets of peers using an assigned hashtag.
Wikis	Wikis were online collaborative writing spaces in the Blackboard LMS (Blackboard Help, 2018c). Students contributed and modified information in a wiki, such as visuals and text.

After students worked through the seven modules, the culminating course requirement was a high-stakes individual writing task. This writing task required students to develop a research manuscript written in APA Style that identified a specific education problem to research and included the following sections: an introduction, a review of literature, a methodology, and a reference list. Within each small group, the course instructor created peer partner assignments for a peer feedback writing task. First, students created a draft of their research manuscript and emailed it to their assigned peer partner. Next, peer partners reviewed each other's drafts, provided helpful feedback, and then emailed the draft with feedback back to their peer partner. Students then reviewed the feedback they received and created a final version of their research manuscript.

Research Sample

In order to acquire a robust understanding of the online peer feedback writing task, a heterogeneous purposive sample was created. All students enrolled in the Education Research

course were sent an email at the beginning of the semester inviting them to participate in the current study. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and had no bearing whatsoever on their course standing. Students who elected to participate provided consent, and completed the survey using a self-selected pseudonym immediately after the online peer feedback writing task concluded.

Data Collection and Analyses

Data were collected via an electronic survey created in Google Forms. The survey consisted of the following seven open-ended questions and statements:

1. Briefly describe your previous experiences with online peer feedback writing tasks.
2. What is the most important thing you will take away from this experience?
3. What challenges did you encounter?
4. Describe how you provided feedback to a peer on their writing.
5. Describe feedback you received that was helpful.
6. Describe feedback you received that was not helpful.
7. Please provide any additional insights.

The electronic survey was piloted by a panel of five professionals who each have significant experience as researchers. Members of the panel checked functionality of the survey and confirmed that all survey questions and statements were understandable and would allow for appropriate responses.

Data were analyzed using a three-level classification diversity analysis procedure (Jansen, 2010). In the first level, data were divided into meaningful segments, and categories were assigned to each segment. In the second level, data with similar category labels were grouped together and reviewed to ensure data were accurately represented. In the third level, relationships between categories were examined and the diverse experiences and views of respondents were contexualized. Reliability with findings was established through the use of analytic memoing and constant comparisons of data with codes.

Findings

The current study investigated views towards an online peer feedback writing task among graduate students. Survey responses were received from 27 respondents: 16 were female and 11 were male. Respondents were all degree-seeking graduate students in the education department and reported their enrollment in the following degree programs: Master of Education, Instructional Design and Technology (n = 14); Master of Education, Educational Leadership (n = 5); Master of Education, Educational Diagnostician (n = 5); Master of Education, Reading (n = 2); and Master of Arts in Teaching (n = 1). Each respondent also described their previous experiences using online peer feedback writing tasks. Findings showed that the majority of respondents had no previous experiences (n = 17), while the remaining 10 respondents had either a few (n = 6) or several (n = 4) previous experiences.

Data analyses revealed four categories related to the diverse experiences and views of respondents towards the online peer feedback writing task (see Table 2). These categories were: (a) Challenges Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, (b) Types of Feedback

during the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, (c) Benefits Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, and (d) Processes for the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task. Each category is presented below in order from greatest to least, along with supportive statements using the words of respondents.

Challenges Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task

Respondents issued 52 statements concerning challenges associated with the online peer feedback writing task. As shown in Table 2, the majority of statements within this category described concerns that respondents had with giving feedback to their peer partner. Respondents expressed concern that they "lacked confidence and knowledge" with aspects of writing (e.g., "grammar and APA style"), course content (e.g., "the research process"), or their peer partner's topic (e.g., "I had to review a person's paper that worked for the railroad. I have no knowledge of how the railroad works and what goes on in that type of business."). These concerns had an impact on how respondents viewed their ability to provide helpful feedback. For example, one respondent explained:

> Just because we are in a graduate level course, we are not experts in the writing field. I was not sure about all the different aspects of my peer's paper that I was required to review. So, I was a little apprehensive about giving some of the feedback that I did.

Similarly, these reservations sparked concerns regarding how peer partners would view the feedback that was provided to them. Respondents indicated that their primary concern with giving feedback was to avoid causing feelings of distress. One respondent clarified:

> My main challenge was deciding whether or not to outline every single mistake found or just do the main errors that a professor would take off for. I didn't want to come off as Mr. Know-It-All and have my peer feeling a certain type of way about me. The last thing I want to do is hurt someone's feelings.

Despite these concerns, three respondents acknowledged that with "time and practice," they "felt more confident" with the online peer feedback writing task.

Respondents also issued statements that described concerns regarding feedback received from their peer partner (see Table 2). These statements expressed uncertainties about their peer partner's ability to provide helpful feedback since they are "not an expert" and, in some cases, feedback from "the instructor and partner were totally opposite from one another." Additionally, respondents noted that personal characteristics hindered them from "taking corrections and constructive criticism from others." One respondent confided:

> I found the reviews to be eye opening and sometimes a little hard to swallow. I am a perfectionist and sometimes criticism or review of my own work can be nerve-racking. It is hard sometimes to hear the truth about our papers.

Additionally, respondents made a few statements that highlighted concerns with management of the online peer feedback writing task (see Table 2). Respondents emphasized the importance of having "a shared understanding of timelines," especially since graduate students often balance many responsibilities beyond their studies, such as "a full-time job." Moreover,

one respondent expressed a concern that the online peer feedback writing task did not afford "one-on-one continuous feedback."

Types of Feedback during the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task

As shown in Table 2, respondents made 49 statements towards the types of feedback connected to the online peer feedback writing task. Within this category, respondents described two types of helpful peer feedback. First, respondents viewed feedback for "APA formatting" and grammatical errors, such as "lack of commas," "sentence structure," and "spelling errors," as helpful and led to simple corrections with their writing. Respondents also conveyed the helpfulness of feedback that prompted more significant changes with their writing, such as "ideas on taking some fluff out of some parts and expanding on others." One respondent explicated how the peer feedback they received engendered deeper levels of thinking with the writing task:

> In the participant section, she asked a question regarding the 10th and 12th grade students that I had listed for the participants. The comment was about why I selected those groups. In my original thought process, it was tied directly to the groups I have available to me every day. What her comment did was to get me thinking more about those groups, their technical abilities, and their age level perception of the material and the process.

Conversely, respondents also provided examples of unhelpful peer feedback (see Table 2). Respondents pointed out that including "only positive comments" and "no constructive criticisms" was unhelpful because this type of feedback did not provide them with specific information "to work on or improve" their writing. For example, one respondent stated, "One comment I received said that I needed to add more to a particular section, but I was left wondering exactly what needed to be added." Additionally, respondents acknowledged that comments perceived as condescending were another example of unhelpful feedback. One respondent stated:

> I did not like that my reviewer tried to teach me what a compound sentence was. English is not my strong suit but I do know what this term is. I also found that sometimes their work did not follow these rules, so I found the comment demeaning.

Benefits Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task

As shown in Table 2, respondents shared 45 statements regarding benefits associated with the online peer feedback writing task. Within this category, the majority of respondents described benefits that they experienced after receiving feedback from their peer partner. All of these statements recognized how "peers can help influence course work" by providing "a fresh set of eyes" "from a different perspective." Having access to "another perspective" permitted respondents to see "how your writing sounds to others." One respondent underscored the value of this process:

> Two heads are better than one. That is, when I thought I had covered everything in detail in my writing assignments, my reviewing peer would always find areas where I could improve my writing, or things that I missed in my writing altogether.

Beyond benefits associated with the receipt of feedback, several respondents pointed out reciprocal advantages (see Table 2). In other words, respondents acknowledged that the online peer feedback writing task had advantages for both the giver and receiver of peer feedback. One respondent specified that the process "makes you very aware of looking at the little details in reviewing someone's paper, which in turn makes you a more detailed writer of your own paper."

Processes for the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task

As shown in Table 2, respondents contributed 37 statements that referred directly to the processes for the online peer feedback writing task. First, respondents noted specific aspects of the process that promoted successful engagement. "Clear instructions" and "established criteria" were found particularly valuable since they were laid out in "a clear and logical fashion." Respondents also described several variations concerning the specific processes they used to review their peer partner's writing. For example, one respondent described the following process:

> I read the paper a few times in a row without trying to critique or edit anything. I did this just to get real familiar with the paper and its content. Then I decided to read and break down the paper by sections. I would read a section of the paper and provide my feedback on that section. I felt this was the best way to give the best feedback in small chunks on every section of the paper. This would help me provide the most beneficial feedback in small chunks without waiting till the end and writing one long feedback response.

Another respondent "read the draft thoroughly aloud" before they "went back and read it section by section and added suggestions to the draft." Afterwards, they "read it aloud again with the added suggestions to make sure it all went together." In addition to variations among processes, various sources were occasionally consulted during peer reviews, such as "the professor's notes," "course textbook," "APA manual," and individuals who were viewed as experts, such as the University's "Writing Center," a "mother who was an English teacher for 25-30 years," or a "colleague" from work. One respondent and their peer partner even made themselves available to each other beyond the online peer feedback writing task:

> If we had any questions about a certain paragraph or sentence, we would communicate via email, responding within 24 hours. After returning each other's papers, if there was a comment/suggestion that was not clear, we would again use email to contact each other for clarification.

Lastly, respondents provided advice for future online peer feedback writing tasks (see Table 2). Respondents made specific recommendations for managing the process, which included "be honest and specific," "know the material to the full extent before giving feedback to a peer," "make sure that communication between partners is well established," "really take the task of reviewing someone's paper seriously because someone is depending on you," and "get to it in a timely manner." Respondents also made recommendations regarding ways in which the process itself could be improved, such as "use the [peer feedback] tool more often," "include a way for students to check that they are getting good advice from their peer," and "give the necessary training to give and receive peer feedback."

Discussion

The current study investigated views towards an online peer feedback writing task among 27 graduate-level students. Data were collected via an electronic survey and analyzed using a three-level classification diversity analysis procedure. Analyses resulted in the identification of the following four categories: (a) Challenges Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, (b) Types of Feedback during the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, (c) Benefits Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task, and (d) Processes for the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task. In an attempt to address inconsistencies present in existing literature, findings from the current study have added new insights regarding the views of graduate students towards an online peer feedback writing task. As a result of these insights, the following three implications are offered for online instructors in postsecondary contexts.

First, it was interesting that the category with the greatest number of supportive statements described challenges that were encountered with the online peer feedback writing task. The primary concentration of these challenges entailed the giving of feedback, which directly contrasted with the finding that elucidated a large number of benefits associated with the receiving of feedback. With peer feedback, providing helpful feedback to others is equally important to obtaining helpful feedback for one's own writing performance (Li, Liu, & Steckleberg, 2010; Nicol et al., 2014). Thus, it is vital that online instructors recognize the different needs for both roles involved with the peer feedback process for writing tasks (Lu & Law, 2012). With this in mind, online instructors must first ensure that students have access to resources and training that develops their ability to give helpful feedback to peers (Lu & Law, 2012; Mulder et al., 2014). Resources may include handouts that provide examples of helpful and unhelpful feedback or checklists that identify specific tasks to complete during peer review tasks. Training can be delivered using audio-, text-, or video-based digital files, such as PowerPoint presentations or podcasts. Correspondingly, online instructors must also have mechanisms in place that monitor the helpfulness of feedback that students receive from their peers so that they may improve their writing performance (Lu & Law, 2012). For example, online instructors may complete reviews of feedback, or students may complete questionnaires to rate feedback quality. Attending to these components equips students to be competent and comfortable with giving helpful peer feedback and using peer feedback they receive wisely (Harms & Roebuck, 2010).

The second implication is concerned with reported findings for types of peer feedback. Although the majority of peer feedback received was deemed helpful, a preponderance of this peer feedback focused on issues with APA Style and the grammar and mechanics of writing. While pointing out these types of errors has value and plausibly enhances the correctness of one's writing, the course instructor was hopeful that students would give each other more revision-oriented feedback, as was modeled throughout the semester. Accordingly, online instructors should structure peer feedback writing tasks so that students give detailed and substantive peer feedback comments that are more likely to precipitate greater improvements with writing quality (Patchan, Schunn, & Correnti, 2016; van der Pol et al., 2008). While designing these tasks, online instructors must be cautious and avoid imposing restrictive requirements, such as minimum word counts (Marsh, Lammers, & Alvermann, 2012). Instead, designing these tasks with less specific requirements stands to "encourage students to more deeply analyze, synthesize, and evaluate" the writing of their peers (Marsh et al., 2012, p. 248).

Such requirements may be communicated in handouts that delineate feedback tips or suggestions.

A final implication is related to the diverse ways in which online instructors should manage the online peer feedback process. Although existing literature has articulated a model of cognitive processes for giving online peer feedback (van Popta, Kral, Camp, Martens, & Simons, 2017), no existing literature was available that detailed behaviors. For example, respondents in the current study utilized different methods to review their peer partner's writing, such as engaging with multiple readings and providing peer feedback strategically section-by-section. Respondents also consulted a variety of sources, such as the course textbook, APA Style manual, and individuals regarded as experts, to reinforce the helpfulness of their feedback. Consequently, online instructors should prepare students for both cognitive and behavioral processes involved with online peer feedback writing tasks. For example, online instructors may incorporate non-graded, practice peer feedback sessions that allow students to describe the behaviors they employed while reviewing their peer partner's writing. Similarly, online instructors might provide students with access to a repository of audio or video files created by external individuals, such as former students or librarians, which detail different peer feedback review behaviors.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As with any research endeavor, there were a few limitations with the current study. First, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the views towards an online peer feedback writing task among graduate students. Thus, comprehensive analyses were not conducted with the actual peer feedback that was given or the subsequent impact of peer feedback that was received. In order to fully understand the potential for this literacy- and digitally-based learning activity, future research should extend the current research design and investigate these areas.

Another limitation was with the small sample size and utilization of a non-randomized sampling technique. Although a small and purposive sample, the research design was appropriate to achieve the purpose for the current study because data collected comprised relevant diversity and achieved sufficient saturation (Jansen, 2010). However, these research design aspects do affect the generalizability of findings. In order to augment generalizability, replication studies should be conducted among other groups of online learners, such as undergraduate students and students from other disciplines.

Conclusion

As enrollments in online learning environments continue to grow, it is vital that online instructors are mindful of quality assurance with the design and delivery of their courses (Marsh et al., 2012). In order to promote deeper understandings of course content and student engagement, online instructors must be intentional with their selection of tools and how they are implemented through learning activities (McGahan, Jackson, & Premer, 2015). The current study has suggested that online peer feedback writing tasks appear to be a promising literacy- and digitally-based learning activity. Although existing literature has presented conflicting views towards online peer feedback writing tasks (Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2014; van der Pol et al., 2008), the current study presented findings and delineated implications that demonstrate ways in which online instructors may capitalize on prospective benefits and address potential barriers.

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Table 2
Overview of Qualitative Findings

Category Names	**Overall Total**	**Types and Number of Supportive Statements**
Challenges Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task	52	• Concerns with giving feedback to peer partner (*n* = 37) • Concerns regarding feedback received from peer partner (*n* = 10) • Concerns with management of the online peer feedback writing task (*n* = 5)

Types of Feedback during the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task	49	• Helpful feedback:
		  ○ Feedback for APA Style and grammar (*n* = 17)
		  ○ Feedback that prompted significant changes with writing (*n* = 15)
		• Unhelpful feedback:
		  ○ Positive comments with no constructive criticisms (*n* = 12)
		  ○ Comment perceived as condescending (*n* = 5)

Benefits Associated with the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task	45	• Benefits with receiving feedback (*n* = 36) • Reciprocal advantages with feedback (*n* = 9)

Processes for the Online Peer Feedback Writing Task	37	• Specific aspects of the peer feedback process that promoted successful engagement:
		  ○ Guidelines and assessment criteria (*n* = 9)
		  ○ Variations with peer review process (*n* = 7)
		  ○ Various sources consulted (*n* = 6)
		• Advice for future online peer feedback writing tasks (*n* = 15)