

Emojis: Developing Enthusiasm in Writing

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OVERVIEW

This technology-infused lesson leveraged learners' interest in emojis to develop vocabulary, fluency, and confidence as writers. Drawing upon emojis from smart phones awakened learners' enthusiasm for writing. We chose this common form of technology based on the resources available in the after-school setting. This lesson is part of a semester-long afterschool writing club which meets once a week. Drawing on Graves' (1983) writing process model, learners wrote stories over three weeks using emojis to scaffold their writing. Some had difficulty with figuring out the integration of emojis into their compositions. However, through examples and conversing with others, this barrier was overcome. This is an instructor-friendly activity which can be implemented in schools.

Topics: Creative Writing, Emojis, Technology-Infused Composing, Texting, Writing Club, Writing Process

Time: Three lessons, one hour each; three hours total

MATERIALS

- Smart phones
 - Those without phones can share or classroom tablets can be used
- Blank white paper
- Pencil, markers
- Prepared examples of emoji stories
- Enough copies for each student to take one of three different sheets of paper with 15 enlarged emojis (Figure 1)
- At least two instructor-created emoji stories
- Five to 10 sheets of all different emojis cut into individual squares
- Enough sheets of lined paper so each student can write on one or more

CONTEXT-AT-A-GLANCE

Setting

A writing club at an after-school not-for-profit.

Modality

In-person delivery

Class Structure

The activity is composed of three, one-hour sessions.

Organizational Norms

This writing club's aim is to mentor and develop fluency and confidence for young writers.

Learner Characteristics

The learners were ages thirteen through seventeen. They were familiar with emojis, smart phones, and basic writing skills even though students' abilities varied.

Instructor Characteristics

Two instructors co-taught the class, although only one was necessary. They both had prior experience teaching writing in public schools.

Development Rationale

Writing in schools is often test driven. There are few opportunities for students to self-select topics. Students were growing bored of writing club. So, the instructors drew on the habits of teenagers' digital communication to entice the learners.

Design Framework

Graves (1983) writing framework emphasizes fluency and Moll et al.'s (1992) concept of funds of knowledge stresses the importance of connecting learning to personal knowledge. The goal of this lesson is to build upon learners' interests in emojis to develop their writing.

STANDARDS

This lesson utilized the Common Core State Standards Initiative (n.d.) writing standards for grade 6.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences (CCSS, n.d.).
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience (CCSS, n.d.).

SETUP

Create three sheets of paper with approximately 15 random emojis (about the size of a U.S. quarter) on each sheet. The instructor needs to write three stories using the different emoji sheets. These will introduce the writing process and serve as examples for the learners.

Arrange tables so that learners can work independently and participate in small and whole group discussions.

CONTEXT AND SETTING

The after-school writing club sessions occurred at the site of a nonprofit organization focused on supporting academic, physical, and socioemotional health. Learner's input was integral to the planning of afternoon activities. Based on their feedback, the space was redesigned from a regular meeting room with office chairs and round tables to feel like a reading and writing nook. Giant bean bags, LED ceiling lights, floral wall stickers, movable plastic tables and chairs, along with window coverings created a relaxed ambiance for writers. Snacks were available during each writing club session.

The center attracted students of all ages from nearby public schools. Most of them walked to the site and a small number were dropped off by their parents. The schedule remained the same each day. The initial

period was spent unwinding from school. There were staff ready to facilitate board games and other activities. Then learners were encouraged to work on their homework prior to a more organized time in age-group activities. Dancing, gardening, or playing a sport were options as well as writing club. Dinner was served before the learners went home.

Prior to implementing this writing lesson, we created a space for writers to express themselves in positive ways. Despite staff encouragement, some learners were hesitant. After a few weeks, we were told that the writing club was too much like school, and the learners did not want to attend. This encouraged us to move toward activities which focused on their interests. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The emoji lesson was the learners' favorite.

Some of the learners liked composing and considered themselves writers. Others found composing to be boring and difficult. Engagement across the board increased during the emoji activity.

The decision to use emojis as inspiration for writing was based on the desire to draw on their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). Given adolescents tendency to rely on digital communication as frequently as direct interactions (Boutet et al., 2021), we pivoted and introduced a social media component. According to Boutet et al. (2021) emojis allow rich emotional expressions and provide a more nuanced form of communication than the teenagers' oral vocabulary.

Topics were based on their interests, not traditional writing prompts. Writing was a tool (Moje, 2000) to express their emotions and beliefs. Colloquial language was also embedded in the writing and responding, another facet of the activity that drew on funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

In this lesson, the primary connection to technology is drawing on (digital) emojis which were rooted in the teenagers' interests. Learners interacted with their phones throughout the lesson. In the Critical Reflection section, there are ideas on how to strengthen the connection to technology.

LEARNING REPRESENTATION

During this lesson, italic text identifies questions or prompts for the learners.

FIRST LESSON (50 MINUTES)

GAIN ATTENTION (5 MINUTES)

In a class discussion, begin asking the following questions to hook learners:

- *Has anyone used an emoji recently? Which one?*

(Wait for responses). Ask learners,

- *Which ones are your favorites?*
- *How do you know what an emoji means?*
- *When do you use emojis in your lives?*
- *What are the emojis you use most often?*

Encourage learners to share emojis from their phones to activate their funds of knowledge. After learners respond, the instructor should ask what role emojis play in their communication. Answers may include expressing emotions or adding humor to text messages. Explain that writers can get what's called, "Writer's block" when they cannot figure out anything to write. Working with emojis is one way to unlock a stuck writer. It also builds fluency and confidence.

Next, the instructor can share examples from the emojis in their own text messages and discuss how they carry different meanings depending on the audience and context.

INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

For this first session, the instructor shares a sheet of 12 emojis, each the size of a U.S. quarter, spread out in rows on a white piece of paper. Then, the instructor reads aloud their prepared story, discussing the decisions they made while composing. This talk about the writing process captures the flexibility of the meaning associated with emojis. For example, one can refer to the emoji of a diving board as swimming or as a metaphor for diving into the unknown. Point out that a writer may compose one sentence per emoji or string several emojis together in one sentence. The instructor's description of their

writing process and the finished draft is important for the learners' confidence and ability to be successful. See Figure 1 for an example of the emoji handout created using openmoji.org.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How can emojis scaffold creative writing?
2. What ways can emojis be used when writing a story?

RECALL PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Next, engage the learners in what they currently know about emojis and how they use them to communicate. When facilitating this lesson, all the learners had a sense of a story with a beginning, middle, and end. They were also familiar with the writing process model of drafting and revising (Graves, 1983). All the learners shared their emoji text messages as part of the writers' club.

The teenagers had a wealth of experiences with emojis and routinely integrated them into texts. Seamlessly integrating emojis and text reflected a flexibility of mind. The use of emojis developed their ability to briefly convey content related to, for example, directions, questions, and feelings. The learners' behavior in writing club reflected a knowledge of what was considered appropriate based on audience and context. Their texts reflected shared meanings of families, friend groups, community, and culture. Related to emojis, learners were fluent, familiar and excited.



Figure 1. Example emojis from openmoji.org.

PRACTICE (25 MINUTES)

In the practice time, learners write individually and discuss the meaning of emojis, their stories, and spelling. The instructor can encourage meaningful conversation with questions such as, *Will you share with me?* or *What you have written so far?* The instructor should also nurture conversations about different meanings of emojis as the learners create their own stories. For example, if the instructor notices a student staring blankly at one emoji, they might say, “Oh I used that one the other day in a text to my friend. What does it mean to you?” Then the instructor could open up the conversation asking other learners if they have used that emoji.

SHARING/ASSESSMENT (10 MIN.)

Learners have the option of reading their piece aloud at the end of class. If a student is too shy to share, they may choose to have a peer, or the instructor, read it aloud to the group. Learners may clap after each piece, name a favorite part and/or ask questions. If they are not finished, the writers may bring their creative story home to complete it.

Formal assessment is not necessary because it is not a classroom activity. However, instructors examined the presence of original content to assess engagement.

SECOND LESSON (45 MINUTES)

The second lesson follows the writing process by focusing on revisions and ownership of the learners’ compositions. The lesson begins with the instructor showing the learners a new grid of emojis and sharing the instructor-completed piece. However, this time the story contains new emojis and writers have the option to add their own hand-drawn emojis or cross-out and ignore provided emojis when writing their stories. See Figure 2 for an example of the emoji handout. This activity scaffolds learners’ ability and desire to revise (Graves, 1983).

Once again, the learners write independently with light conversation about the meaning of emojis and their stories or even the spelling of a word. The instructor might ask, *Which emojis are you crossing out and why?* or *What emojis have you created?* The conclusion involves learners reading aloud their

pieces and talking about the decisions they made when adding and deleting emojis.

Figure 2 shows the emojis used in the activity. Example stories created by students using these emojis are provided in the next subsection. Note how students interpret the meaning of the emojis differently to create their narrative.



Figure 2. Emojis used in the add/delete emojis story activity.

EXAMPLE STORIES FROM STUDENTS

Two example stories from students are provided. These stories were composed based on the emojis presented in Figure 2.

“Digital Life”

It makes sense that the explosion of technology caused chaos in our world. We began to hear more of the world and see the grins of those miles away. But I often find myself putting out digital fires caused by the mindless zombies who worship the mindless doom scroll, rather than the thread that connects us, turning a mile of physical footsteps into a millisecond between contact. Both the natural and unnatural world has been affected by the flight of technology. And the ideas were born from its origins. The world can either become a beautiful paradise or a twister of mixed omens depending on how we move forward. But if we do want to find paradise, and I’m sure we all do, then we must sport the mindset needed to keep our minds from melting into the endless progression of technology.

Celebrating her composition the author wrote the following evaluations on her own paper, “Slay!” “100%” “10/10” “I ate that so hard.” Happy with her piece, she added these comments even before sharing with her peers. The use of colloquial language captures her comfort and confidence as a writer. This emoji activity invited and affirmed her funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

Viewing the same emojis, another learner created a different narrative.

“Untitled”

I heard the explosion outside when all the power went out. As the world outside silenced, I felt sharp teeth in the side of my neck while things broke and shattered around me. Then, I was in the air being carried firefighter style by a sparkling white man with dead eyes. He was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen and now I owe him my life for saving mine. We finished our travel through the woods when we arrived at his uncle’s house where I was welcomed by all except one...

The descriptive language captures the author’s creativity and romantic flair which intentionally leaves the audience in suspense.

Side-by-side examples capture how the same emojis scaffolded two students to explore writing in meaningful and inventive ways.

FEEDBACK AND CHALLENGE

The instructor, after hearing a few learners’ stories, shared, *I notice no one is using the _____ emoji or The _____ emoji is being used in lots of different ways.* One challenge includes keeping learners with a variety of writing abilities and confidence engaged. Teachers can bridge the differences by pointing out something one student is doing well or an interesting sentence someone else wrote. The instructor’s comments can encourage students to continue writing and even further developing their piece.

LESSON THREE (45 MINUTES)

The third lesson follows the pattern of the previous two. This time there are five to 10 sheets of all different emojis cut into squares, so their order is not predetermined. The instructor shares their story which is composed of a variety of emojis glued down between words.

The learners have the option of 1) continuing their previous story, 2) revising by gluing on new emojis over old ones, or 3) starting a new story. At the end of the time, the group comes together again for sharing and a discussion of what it was like to organize the

emojis in their own preferred order. The instructor might say, *what was it like selecting the emojis you wanted and determining the order?* Some students might have enjoyed the freedom of creating the order of the emojis and words, but others may have experienced writer’s block with so few parameters.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Each lesson described above was implemented once in the writing club. The activity helped invigorate learners’ writing and increase engagement. The emojis offered an open-ended beginning, middle, and end in which the writers could develop their own stories. Exchanges among peers were positive and affirming.

The learners were motivated to start writing and discussing emojis with their peers. Conversations included emoji meanings coupled with sharing excerpts of their writing.

Participants nurtured each other’s voices acting as a community of writers. The enthusiasm that filled the space was palpable. Writers eagerly shared their writing with the whole group. The writers attentively listened and affirmed their peers’ unique styles and creativity. In future lessons, there are changes we plan to implement which would further increase the role of technology.

LESSON UPDATES

During the first lesson, the instructor could share the beginning of their story using digital emojis in a Google Doc. This would contain approximately 12 emojis which the teacher would integrate into her story. Then learners could be invited to take advantage of any set of emojis including creating their own. Students could also write their own stories in Google Docs. The technology would enable learners to share their screens to discuss the meaning and use of an emoji.

Another possibility is for the instructor to model using the digital emojis on a social media platform. Rather than using a Google Doc, the instructor could create a social media page, and post emojis with

text. Instructor and learners could share their social media platform on a whiteboard or on their own personal devices.

To extend the activity, students could continue to interact with each other in the social media account in upcoming days. They could generate or introduce new emojis using platforms such as [Canva](#), an online graphic design tool, and collectively compose stories. This change promotes agency and motivates high schoolers to continue writing.

LESSON BENEFITS

We found three benefits from this lesson.

First, the lesson scaffolds writers. For hesitant writers or those who have difficulty coming up with a topic, emojis are a framework that can be used to start writing stories.

Second, creativity is nurtured by emoji writing. Learners are exposed to different styles and genres. They can explore romance, horror, and realistic fiction. As participants wrote freely, they discovered different ways to use emojis. The writer's creativity is reflected in their use of action verbs, adjectives, and metaphors.

Lastly, this activity nurtures a sense of community as learners create stories, participate in impromptu discussions, read aloud their pieces, and consider the meanings of emojis. Conversations about emojis can act as a catalyst for cultivating relationships and promoting writing in new ways.

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