What if your student could learn digital skills needed for the 21st century, improve their writing skills, and exercise their creativity and imagination, all from their home, and without having to spend valuable inservice time training teachers? There are tools online to help students do just that, but one that is VERY popular with students, recording 6 million logins per month, is WebKinz. WebKinz is a website that students get access to when they purchase a WebKinz toy. In some elementary schools, the school purchases one WebKinz toy per classroom (be sure to save the access code on the collar). The toy gives access to the website for a year, and classroom level access ensures that "no student is left behind" if they cannot afford the toy ($10-$15).

In "Teaching as Storytelling", Kieran Egan states, "If we attend to the ways children learn in their daily lives outside of school, we can devise ways of organizing the curriculum to enhance their learning inside school" (1988). The WebKinz website has several educational pieces, as well as many designed just for fun. Two games within WebKinz, Booger gets an A and Quizzios Word Challenge offer good learning activities. The virtual world created for the WebKinz pet also offers significant teachable moments for the creative teacher. However, this article will explain how to maximize one of the most powerful features for writing development, WebKinz Studio.

To understand WebKinz Studio, you want to conceptualize a digital puppet show. WebKinz Studio has some significant advantages over a traditional puppet show. It allows students to begin developing video creation skills while still in the second or third grade. It allows characters to be viewed up close, at mid-range, and from a distance, giving students an introduction to camera angles. Finally, it creates a visual component that helps guide student writing by giving them characters with emotions to move and develop.

To begin with WebKinz Studio, you must first navigate through the website to WebKinz Studio, then purchase it with $1000 dollars of "Kinzcash", the currency of the virtual webkinz world. Students get $2000 in Kinzcash when they buy a webkinz toy, and can earn more by playing games, including the aforementioned Booger gets an A and Quizzios Word Challenge. The WebKinz Studio costs $1000 in Kinzcash. The steps below will get you started.

1. Expand the “THINGS TO DO” tab on the action bar. The “THINGS TO DO” tab is located on the lower right hand side of the screen.
2. From the expanded THINGS TO DO tab select “Shopping” then “W-shop”.
3. Once inside the W-shop, navigate to the “TOYS & BOOKS” section then select it.
4. Look for the WebKinz Studio on page 6 of 7. Click the “ADD TO CART” tab. Then click the checkout tab.

5. Next go to the little cash register and click on the “BUY ITEMS” tab.

6. Now that you own the WebKinz studio click “X” to close the W-Shop.

7. Return to the action bar and expand the “THINGS TO DO” tab.
8. Click on the “My Room” tab. (“My room” is where children build a virtual world for their “pet”/avatar.)

9. Click on “maps” to locate the room WebKinz studio is in. Click on the WebKinz studio to open it.

Now that you have your WebKinz studio, you are ready to go. A movie can consist of up to fifteen scenes. The Director/User will name the movie, hire the actors, select music and a background set. The actions and emotions sets will allow for many more options. Now the full power of being a director is at your finger tips. (Note: If these steps sound complicated, remember that most third graders are fairly familiar with the website, and can navigate it with ease. In other words, the teacher will have a lot of “helpers” for this lesson.)

Making Your WebKinz Movie

1. Next click on the “Make A Show” banner.

2. Type in the name of your movie.

3. Select a background from the list. By default there are two backgrounds.
4. Select a sky from the list. By default there are two skies.
5. Next, select music from the list and push play.

6. Click the “BEGIN” tab.

7. Up to two actors can be hired for one movie. Click and drag one character from the list and drop it into the film cell. Repeat this step for the second actor.
Next: Select the camera angle of your first scene. Camera angles are both actors far, both actors close, or an individual actor.

Click the “NEXT” tab.

8. Select the actor 1 or 2 dialogue box to enter text for each actor. Take a few minutes to enter text into each dialogue box. Quick tip: WebKinz uses a safe list of approved words. If the text is in red it will not be accepted. In my experience with both elementary age students and college students using this tool, it is usually the college age students that get a bit frustrated with this.

Note: You do not have to enter dialogue for each character if you don’t want to. If that is the case, just leave the default text in the dialogue box.

9. Next, select an EMOTION from the drop down box located above each actor. Each actor can have an emotion. The emotions available are happy, sad, angry, scared, suspicious and blushing. While the range of emotions is limited, the way the Studio guides children through the process of picking and using an emotion for their character helps them recognize the need and purpose emotions play in creating engaging content, both written and video.

10. Continue by selecting an ACTION from the drop down box. Once again each actor can have an action. The available actions include...
standing, jumping, waving, shaking and dancing.

ACTION

standing
jump
wave
shake
dance

II. Select the "NEXT SCENE" tab when you are satisfied with your first scene.

NEXT SCENE

11. Select the “NEXT SCENE” tab when you are satisfied with your first scene.

12. Repeat steps for up to 14 more times as you are allocated a total of 15 scenes per movie.

13. When you are satisfied with your movie and wish to quit remember to select the “End Show” button next to the director’s chair at the bottom right of the movie screen.

Note: Remember to save your movie so you can retrieve it later. This option will appear on the next screen after you elect to end your show.

Editing Your Movie
1. From your pet’s room enter into the studio movie maker by clicking on the image.

2. From here you will be directed once again into the studio. Select “My Old Shows” at the bottom right of the screen to begin editing your previously made movie.

3. Now select one of the two shows you wish to edit.

4. Once you have selected a show to edit, click on the “EDIT SHOW” button that appears.

5. Now you are ready to edit your show. Editing your show takes you through the same steps as making your show. When you are satisfied with the editing process select “End Show” and, as always, remember to save.

The best option to choose is screen capture. Choose “default audio device” for your sound capture. If that doesn’t work, try one of the other options. Windows Media Encoder 9 is also useful for doing demonstrations of anything you may wish to demonstrate on a computer, and save it as a .wmv video.

Summary
John Dewey wrote, (1938/1997)"It is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have; that this experience and the capacities that have been developed during it’s course provide the starting point for all further learning" (74). Although it is occurring seventy years later, digital interfaces such as WebKinz Studio can provide a starting point within the student’s framework of understanding that teachers can build on, expand and explore. With an estimated 43% of our 3-11 year old students visiting virtual worlds in 2009 (eMarketer Research Group, 2007), we cannot afford to turn our backs on the learning opportunities they present.

References:
Egan, Kieran (1989) Teaching as Storytelling, University Of Chicago Press
Buckeliner, Warren 2008 Like Taking Candy From a Baby: How Young Children Interact with Online Environments retrieved online at: www.consumerwebwatch.org
Yost, Nancy Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education 08 presentation, Las Vegas, Nevada