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"Walking a Thin Line": Exploring the Tensions Between Composition Curriculum and Students' Lives as Digital Writers

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Abstract: Tensions between high school writing curricula and students' lived literacies persist in spite of burgeoning research in multimodal composition. Drawn from the second iteration of a multi-year formative experiment, this narrative explores the dissonance stemming from the meeting of these two worlds in a project titled Digital Self Portrait. This conceptual article includes one 10th grade student's digital multimodal project titled "Offline," which was created on social media. "Offline" demonstrates how students can draw on various lived literacies, or resources and experiences, to successfully navigate digital writing in ways that mirror school-sanctioned writing outcomes. The second half of the study explored the change in pedagogical practice that occurred when the teacher learned to trust her students to take ownership of writing in all of its forms. In addition, as the teacher who partnered in the project reconsidered her instructional practices, this study explored how she reconceptualizes students' ownership of their own writing across many multimodal forms.

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Introduction[1]

Tenth grade students in Mrs. Kelly's Pre-Advanced Placement (AP) English class are seated around tables, watching quietly in the dim light as Aubrey projects her Digital Self Portrait (DSP) on the white board at the front of the room. (All names of people and places are pseudonyms.) Reading aloud from the narrative of "Offline" (Figures 1A – 1G), Aubrey describes how she, unlike most of her peers, was prohibited by her parents from having a phone or access to social media and often felt excluded.

"Offline," the digital comic she drew using SketchBook Pro (an illustration app), documents her thoughts, feelings, and experiences of social media. Writing so personally for an audience of her peers, presents Aubrey – and Mrs. Kelly – with a rare moment of insight and vulnerability in a classroom space typically dominated by test preparation, a type of teaching that leads to what George Hillocks (2003) characterizes as "vacuous thinking and writing" (p. 70). This opportunity, in contrast, is something Aubrey has not typically experienced in her K-12 career, heretofore dominated by formulaic writing prompts, rubrics, and evaluative feedback. Aubrey takes a deep breath and begins.

"Offline" opens with a page divided into two panels in which a girl is closing her laptop and standing. The text reads, "This player has gone offline … I'm not someone who uses social media." Later, Aubrey explained to Fawn that "offline" is a term used in gaming: When someone is in the game, they are "online," and others playing the game can connect with her. Therefore, "offline" signals a disconnection from the gaming community and, in Aubrey's DSP, with her peers at school who use social media. During the presentation to her peers, the "offline" reference made sense, as Fawn noted in her field notes. Students smiled and jotted notes on their peer reflection handouts (Figure 2). One student noted, "I found it interesting because Aubrey relates to her project very well, and more than you'd expect." Another stated, "The pictures are an excellent way to show her feelings towards technology."

As Aubrey read, her peers viewed and listened intently. "But without a phone, it gets quite lonely. It is almost like I am offline," she spoke, wistfully (Figure 1E). Approximately seven months after this initial presentation in an interview with Fawn, she reflected on whether her classmates understood her perspective. She said, "I think they did and didn't." Aubrey continued to say, however, that the desired effect was short lived:

> I think when they were looking at it, [they thought] like "she's neat, she's someone who doesn't have that stuff, she doesn't focus on that

[1] We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

Figure 1E

> online and all that stuff." But progressively as the [school] year went by, I don't think they saw it that way. They were still on social media … but over time they went back on their phones. What are you gonna do?

Indeed, what could Aubrey have done to make her point more persuasive? How might she have combined text, images, and other media to make a more compelling claim? How might she have enacted her everyday literacies while still meeting the demands of a challenging pre-AP curriculum? And, to address Hillocks' (2003) concerns – as well as the concerns of thousands of English teachers like Mrs. Kelly – how might the challenges of rethinking the writing curriculum have (re)positioned her within her own English department and high school? These were the questions that drove Mrs. Kelly, with Fawn, to create the DSP unit.

Multimodal Composition: Walking a Thin Line

America's youth are "born digital" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Nearly all U.S. teens (95%) have access to a smartphone and nearly half (45%) say they are on the internet "almost constantly" (Schaeffer, 2019, para. 1). The ability to read, evaluate, and share information multimodally (e.g., through combinations of image, text, sound, video) is increasingly important, underscoring the need to consider literacy as multiple literacies – not just reading and writing. Though young people write prolifically using digital tools, they don't see their activity as "real writing" (Lenhart et al., 2008, para. 4). A recent review of scholarship suggests that teachers, too, have yet to embrace the digital multimodal composing that so engages their students (Khadka & Lee, 2019). This disconnect persists in spite of the preeminent professional organizations in English Education pushing for instruction that honors these modalities. For instance, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) calls for students who can "create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts" (NCTE, 2013, para. 1). In guidance from their "Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing," NCTE suggests that teachers understand "the ways digital environments have added new modalities while constantly creating new publics, audiences, purposes, and invitations to compose" (NCTE, 2016, para. 4). The gaps among theory, practice, and students' lived literacies provided the impetus for the Digital Self Portrait (DSP) project.

For her DSP, Aubrey, a 10th grade honors student, created something unlike any of her classmates: a comic book that described her relationship with social media through text, hand drawn digitized images, and other media elements like emojis. Yet, despite the many interesting and innovative student projects like Aubrey's, tensions that surfaced for the teacher during the DSP were abundant and reflected the complexity inherent in teaching writing in general – and around enacting changes in the writing curriculum to reflect what literacy educators know about multiple literacies in particular. In one interview, the teacher, Mrs. Kelly, used the phrase "walk a thin line" to describe the discord she

Figure 1H


12 Photos - Oct 16, 2016
OFFLINE
This player has gone offline.
I'm not someone who uses social media.
But without a phone, it gets quite lonely.
It is almost like I am offline.
In fact, life without social media and a phone is pretty isolated.
I think it can be a nuisance sometimes
Sure, it has its benefits
But it also has its disadvantages.
It is actually funny seeing it through my perspective.
I don't hate it.
I just don't particularly like it.
While most people live through social media,
I tend to sit back,
And I don't mind it.
Without technology, there would be no social media.
Nowadays, everyone is connected to technology.
Constantly glued to screens.
Now, I may not post everything that happens in my life online.
And I'm not saying that that is a bad thing.
I am also connected to technology constantly.
IPad
Laptop
IPod
But I think I'm living life just fine.
This player has gone online.

experienced between innovative and traditional approaches to teaching rhetoric and composition.

It is within these tensions that we find possibility, spaces where teachers like Mrs. Kelly and students like Aubrey can begin to rethink what it means to be writers and composers in the contemporary world. Yet these transitions are not easy, nor do they come quickly, as we discovered by delving into their stories.

Background

Mrs. Kelly and Aubrey were part of a larger, multi-year formative experiment in digital multimodal composition (DMC) conducted by Fawn. A formative experiment, sometimes referred to as design-based research, centers on a series of learning experiences and/or assessments, often designed in collaboration with teachers in authentic classroom contexts (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). The intervention in this case, the Digital Self Portrait or DSP, consisted of a student-directed genre study of an interactive digital text (e.g., social media, digital video, online comics), explorations of various media (e.g., text, images, audio), peer workshops, and literature circles with young adult fiction about people's relationships with/in digital worlds (e.g., *Guy in Real Life, Random, Fangirl*). Similar to recent explorations of teaching and learning which seek "to develop students as writers through fashioning writing from the 'material of their own experience'" (Monk, 2017, p. 189), the project in this study invited students to explore composition on their own terms, in ways that are often not understood or endorsed in the space of typical English classrooms.

The narratives in this conceptual article were drawn from the second iteration of the formative experiment. Data included artifacts (such as student projects) and student interviews focused on retroactive reflections of composing processes with screencast recordings. Aubrey's project, "Offline," was one of seven DSPs collected. Other data included interviews with the teacher, lesson plans and related instructional materials, handwritten notes, correspondence with the teacher, and classroom observations. Fawn was only able to observe students during project presentations, given that technology constraints such as the school's filtered internet prevented students from composing during class time.

In the study, data were analyzed in order to explore two research questions:

1. In what ways did students experience the process of digital multimodal composition?
    a. How did students compose digital multimodal projects (i.e., what was the composing process)?
    b. What resources did students bring to the digital multimodal composing process?
    c. What academic and everyday literacies did students use in the process?
    d. What did learning look like in digital multimodal composition?
2. In what ways did teachers experience planning and instruction for digital multimodal composition?

Context

Mrs. Kelly's and Aubrey's forays into multimodal composition took place in a large, urban public high school in the southwestern United States. Crestview High School (all place names are pseudonyms) was situated in a higher socioeconomic community within one of the most diverse school districts in the nation – and also one of the least integrated (Rabinowitz et al., 2019). In 2015-2016, the school year the study was initiated, the ethnic make-up of the school was 60% white with Hispanic/Latinx as second the largest group at about 17% of students.

The remaining demographics were 10% Asian, 7% two or more races, 4% Black, and fewer than 2% of students identifying as Native American or Pacific Islander. Comparatively, the district-wide ethnic distribution was Hispanic/Latinx, 45.7%; Caucasian, 26.2%; Black/African American, 13.3%; Asian, 6.4%; and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Native American, 2% combined. Only 8% of Crestview's students qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch. The English curriculum was steadfastly traditional and access to technology limited. In fact, the syllabus that Mrs. Kelly and her grade-level teaching team used in Pre-AP Language and Composition had changed very little in more than a decade.

Mrs. Kelly approached Fawn for support in revising her Pre-AP curriculum to include multimodal composition. In the next section, we discuss how Mrs. Kelly anticipated resistance to changes in the rhetoric and composition curriculum from her grade-level team, her administrators, and parents. However, she felt it necessary to incorporate everyday literacy practices in order to make writing both more relevant and less intimidating for her students.

"Already Writers": Creating the Digital Self-Portrait with Mrs. Kelly

Mrs. Kelly's class had just completed the DSP during the previous month as part of a unit of study in multimodal composition centered on the idea of self-presentation on social media. During the prior school year, the curriculum for Mrs. Kelly's 10th grade Pre-AP course was negotiated by the members of the English department at her school and emphasized rhetoric and writing. The course was centered around foundational texts in American literature presented chronologically. Essays were the primary focus for writing instruction and nonfiction texts were supplementary to the American literature canon.

The syllabus for the course had not changed much over the years, and the first time Mrs. Kelly sought to incorporate digital writing she was met with resistance from the other 10th grade English teachers at her school. Due to this opposition, she said she struggled with the first iteration of the project in part because of "that feeling of I'm not on the same page as the rest of my team, kind of feeling that pull." After the first iteration of the DSP, a discernible shift in the curriculum took place. In the syllabus, chronological American literature gave way to content arranged quarterly by themes: Technology and Voice, Personal Narrative, Argumentation, and Social Issues. Essay writing typically served as an initial assessment for the course, but this year, students were introduced to the DSP.

With the DSP, students could choose any digital medium (e.g., Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) through which to compose their self-portrait. Guidelines for the project were purposefully vague in order to create a space for students to remix modes. They had license to combine different ways of communicating (e.g., text, image, speech, etc.) and means of communicating (e.g., podcasts, social media, videos, etc.) that best conveyed their vision (Canady et al., 2018). Students continued to draw on class conversations about rhetoric – a staple of the AP curriculum – to define purpose and audience, as well as to communicate their ideas through digital media. This meant students were beginning the year with unstructured writing in an atmosphere where formulaic writing, such as the five-paragraph essay, typically predominates (Campbell & Latimer, 2012).

Academic writing is an important skill set, but Mrs. Kelly believed in a more inclusive definition of writing: "I feel like that's only one facet of their identity as a human and one facet of their identity as a writer." Mrs. Kelly is not alone in this sentiment, as others have criticized over-simplified and structured writing, claiming that "the preset format lulls students into a nonthinking automaticity" (Rorschach, 2004, para. 28). Furthermore, although

AP structures can foster effective writing with the support of a capable teacher, it has a history rooted in elitism that may alienate traditionally underrepresented students (Berliner & Glass, 2014). With the DSP, Mrs. Kelly wanted to bring academic and lived literacies into "greater companionship" because, she claimed, "our students are already writers."

What was Enacted Through the DSP

The lived literacies in which people engage, particularly online, are typically invisible (DeVoss et al., 2010). Every day, billions of people like our students carry "multimedia production studios [in their] pockets" (Rheingold, 2012, p. 1). And though students are adept at using digital media, "the mindful use of digital media doesn't happen automatically" (Rheingold, 2012, p. 1). If schools seek to help students "develop as members of a writing public" (Yancey, 2004, p. 311), curriculum must acknowledge the multiple media that people use in meaning making. The semiotic resources, or the signs and symbols available for constructing messages (Bezemer & Kress, 2008), that students use outside school with and through technology are fundamentally reshaping the way students do literacy in school.

Youth are at the center of technological change, but the nature of their engagement is often misunderstood (boyd, 2008, 2014). Typically, perspectives of youth engagement with digital media vacillate between extremes: either new technologies are destroying the social fabric and undermining human intelligence, or they are heralding a new age of interconnection (boyd, 2014). Yet studies have shown that youth gain valuable skills through peer-mentorship in virtual participatory cultures with low barriers to participation and fluid mentorship (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Itō et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2009). The literacy practices of youth have also received critical attention (i.e., revealing and challenging systems of power) that highlights the rich "lived literacies" in which they engage (Alvermann, 2002a, 2002b; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Morrell et al., 2013). These lived literacies create space for the agency of student authors to make important choices with existing media (Cimasko & Shin, 2017). Others have explored social media through an emphasis on consequences, underscoring the necessity for teaching youth about ethics in digital spaces (James, 2014; Jenkins, 2007). Regardless of perspective, technology continues to advance and shape the social landscape. If schools are to remain relevant, "learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes students bring to learning" (New London Group [NLG], 1996, p. 72). In other words, writing practices must be more visible and intentional to reflect everyday visual, verbal, and social languages.

Opening up the typical high school English curriculum to such practices is a risky move for both teachers and students. A major survey of 2,462 AP and National Writing Project teachers found that by and large, teachers view digital technology as helpful in teaching writing to secondary students (Purcell et al., 2013). However, the survey also revealed concerns that the blending of informal and formal writing, lack of access to technology, and the "digital tool as toy" attitude compounded students' tendency to take shortcuts or "not put effort into writing" (Purcell et al., 2013, pp. 2-3). A definition of writing that includes multimodality underscores the social and cultural importance of media in students' lives, but new methods and theories may not necessarily reflect a range of approaches to literacy education that underscores the content and social contexts of English teaching (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013).

Mrs. Kelly's concerns reflected these challenges. She worried that she did not use social media and therefore was not relevant. Additionally, she saw students taking shortcuts in multimedia composing: "They follow each other if they don't have their own kind of voice and concept for themselves." She continued, "They just do what everybody else is doing." She was also frustrated from teaching outside of her comfort zone and thought the first version of the project "didn't go as deep. But I think it was because I didn't know where to go with it, I didn't know what the outcome was, it was so kind of foggy and fuzzy for me." Luckily, Mrs. Kelly had the courage to try again: "If they [students] don't like what they're doing, they're going to shut off. They're going to feel resentful. They're only going to be responding on a superficial level."

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Walking this thin line, for Mrs. Kelly, meant that she had to straddle the tension between incorporating innovative approaches to teaching rhetoric, such as multimodality and visual rhetoric, and the pressures of adhering to the traditional curriculum, especially when high stakes testing is involved.

Research around digital and multimodal composition is growing, yet this growth does always happen in schools and, even if it is, the patterns are unequal. In Smith's (2014) review of 76 studies of digital multimodality conducted between 1999-2012, themes included evidence of significant engagement for students in general, and academic benefits for marginalized groups in particular. This instruction included scaffolding and overt instruction by teachers, and a broad understanding that the composing process is collaborative, social, and recursive. Motivation is an important factor, especially considering that only 44% of American high school students self-report as being engaged in school (Busteed, 2013). Even with that factor in play, others argue that educators must move beyond motivation (Jocius, 2016) to consider how students engage in the composition process and to encourage more intentional use of modes in writing through overt instruction (DePalma, 2015). In our experiences as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers, we would argue that the vast majority of high school teachers feel underprepared to teach digital multimodal composition, including Mrs. Kelly.

Teaching with digital media meant a shift in practice for Mrs. Kelly that was fraught with tension. She said, "I feel like I'm caught in this, this place of conflict. Because I feel like I need to be the one to bring in all the materials, I need to be the one to structure all of the lessons." The students, she argued, would have to take the role traditionally reserved for the teacher if the learning were going to be "authentic":

> I don't know how to do that. And like that goes back to that feeling of me feeling like, I am disconnected from their experiences. Like, I make very deliberate choices about how I'm using technology and how much I'm using. And, and I am pretty limited, you know what I mean? Like, I'm not online. I don't have Facebook. I don't do Twitter. You know what I mean? All of this stuff that my kids use, I'm not doing.

Writing with digital technology, and especially social media, meant that Mrs. Kelly was treading in new territory. Rather than assigning an essay or a formal piece of writing with the DSP, Mrs. Kelly asked her students to include writing in their projects that complemented their intentions and took advantage of the features of the media. For example, students

who chose to do Instagram could include captions or hashtags, while students who created digital videos posted on YouTube could write introductory text that would appear under the video. A written reflection after the completion of the project contributed to assessment and self-evaluation. The centerpiece of assessment was a co-constructed contract between students and Mrs. Kelly, described in more detail in the "Totally Different" section below (see also Figure 2).

In this space, her students would be more familiar with the material for writing than she was. When Mrs. Kelly and Fawn collaborated on the first and second iterations of the DSP, a co-constructed contract addressed concerns about Mrs. Kelly's lack of experience with the informal, digital writing her students were fluent in outside school. Co-constructing the terms (based on the genre studies of multimedia texts conducted by students) meant that Mrs. Kelly's students were the experts in everyday media and she was expert in rhetoric and composition. Together, they could engage more deeply in the study of multimodal languages or meaning. Furthermore, Mrs. Kelly worried that asking students to curate content would be risky: "It goes back to this concept of control, because if they are the ones who are bringing that in, then my fear as a teacher is, what if it's offensive? What if it's not very good?" As we think about the tensions Mrs. Kelly experienced as a teacher, we can also learn from Aubrey's experiences as a student.

"Totally Different": Going Offline with Aubrey

For students who had long succeeded at playing the game of school, the change in Mrs. Kelly's Pre-AP curriculum was jarring as well. The DSP pushed students outside their comfort zones by design. The project in the intervention asked students to express something essential about their "self" through social media or another interactive digital platform.

Figure 2

Digital Self Portrait Peer Reflection

1. Presenter's Name:
2. Project Medium:
    a. What did you find particularly unique, inventive, creative, or exemplary about this person's project?
    b. What elements about this person's life or personality did you learn from their Digital Self Portrait?
    c. Do you feel the medium this person chose was an adequate method for communicating something about him/herself? Explain.
    d. What is one question you have about this person's project or presentation?

Students participated in selected provocative nonfiction readings, read excerpts from classic literature, participated in young adult literature reading groups, and explored the affordances of various modes (aural, visual, spatial, etc.) through media in popular culture ranging from music to celebrity Instagrams. Students then chose a digital medium for their projects and were encouraged to select platforms with which they were already familiar. Students also participated in peer workshops on their own digital multimodal compositions.

The digital media genre study allowed teams of students to identify their own exemplar multimodal texts. In the context of the DSP, they were encouraged to consider the rhetoric of self-presentation through an exploration of craft, isolating conventions specific to the medium. For example, students composing DSPs using Instagram often selected celebrity accounts as exemplars. Students attended to media-specific conventions

such as profiles (image and text), patterns or styles in images, captions, and hashtags. For example, during a whole class discussion of Kylie Jenner's Instagram, students noticed curation, the positioning of product, photographic composition, profile information, and even the number of Jenner's followers (75.7 million at that time) compared to the number she was following (177). Genre studies created opportunities for students to attend to what makes a multimodal text compelling or exemplary in a particular medium.

A Portrait of Aubrey

Several years ago, Aubrey's family relocated to this large, southwestern city from New York City. She attended a high-achieving, urban high school with over 3,000 students. Though she did not give her age, most students in the 10th grade were between 15-16 years old. Aubrey's twin sister accompanied her to the interview with Fawn. Both girls are self-proclaimed artists and said that their mother "doesn't know how that happened." Aubrey has at least one other younger sister, who often served as a model for her artwork. Although she did not have access to a cellular phone and was not allowed to use social media, she had a laptop, iPad, and iPod. More importantly, she was an avid gamer.

In the beginning of the DSP, Aubrey was ambivalent about using social media and technology because of her position as an outsider to social media culture, though we speculate that part of her discomfort stemmed from the fact that the DSP assignment was far outside the typical norms of school instruction. In particular, Aubrey noted that even beginning to engage with media in this way was markedly different from what she did in her other English classes. She described the change in this manner:

> So, this was different from our last year. We focused a lot on like mythology, and all that stuff, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and this year was like "Guys, we're gonna be using our phones a lot." I'm like, "Oh, great!" So, definitely this was totally different [from] what I would usually expect.

Aubrey's Digital Self Portrait

Aubrey's DSP, "Offline," is a digital comic that explores the pros and cons to social media use through the eyes of an outsider to that culture. The biographical comic investigates issues in technology use that, unlike the title page (Figure 1A), are not always black and white. Ordinarily, Aubrey would feel uncomfortable with the use of social media platforms but the DSP project was open enough to allow for multiple approaches and perspectives, ultimately allowing her to share the digital comic with a wider audience. By intentionally designing a DSP for an audience of social media users, Aubrey was able to enlist specific conventions to signal shared discourses with her audience, even from an outsider's perspective.

In "Offline," the story begins, "I'm not someone who uses social media." This line establishes the perspective of the narrator and hints at the rhetorical purpose of the comic (Figure 1B). On the second page, the reader is confronted with a diagonally split panel. The upper panel is accompanied by the text, "I think

Figure 1A **Figure 1B**

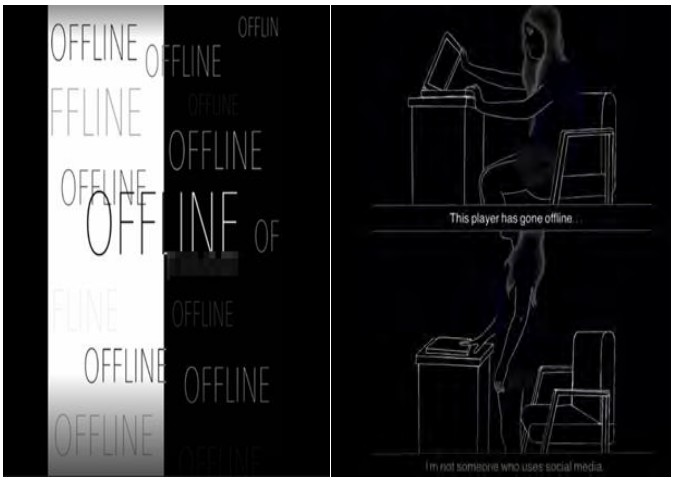
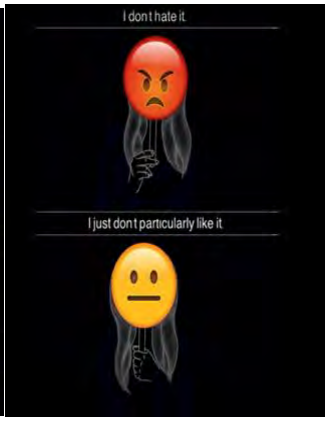


Figure 1C

Figure 1D



it can be a nuisance sometimes. Sure, it has its benefits." The image shows a male and female looking at each other, presumably having a conversation. The text that is part of the image says, "connecting with friends." Aubrey said she used blue for the male to reflect the color used in Facebook, while pink was less intentional – or unconscious – for the female. Under the slashing diagonal, a girl in a midnight blue grasps her knees. She is surrounded by text-speak like "kys" (kill yourself) and "Y r u even alive?" This image represents cyberbullying. The text states, simply: "But it also has its disadvantages." Aubrey chose the dark blue to communicate depression (See Figure 1C).

Aubrey continues on the following page, "I don't hate it. I just don't particularly like it." The split panels show the narrator holding emoji masks that reflect the mood of the text (see Figure 1D). Again, Aubrey made an intentional choice to leverage social media conventions. She said that "I found if I use emojis it would connect to people. I really want to connect with everyone if they're like 'I really don't see it from her perspective … Oh! but she's using emojis, so something's happening.'" Images in visual rhetoric require careful arrangement to communicate with an audience. Though Aubrey did not use social media, she knew her audience well enough that she could communicate, in this case employing the visual languages of emojis to ensure that her point was clear.

Writing provided a foundation for designing the digital comic. Aubrey described to Fawn how she wrote the story first, then carefully drew images that would not only supplement the text, but also communicate the same message in a different way. She intuitively drew images that underscored the unique affordances of both textual and visual rhetoric. Aubrey described her choices this way:

> But for my project I would say I have had to think of things to convey my message to create a story that was like someone from the outside perspective looking in and be like, "Oh, so that's what she's going through." So, I would say my project definitely involved writing to it because I had to convey a message somehow that's not just through pictures.

Aubrey's comic continues with more illustrations, both visually and verbally, of the vantage point of a social media outsider. She deftly constructed her argument in a way that did not alienate her audience, who she assumed were social media users. She talked about how she, too, used technology, employing humor to show conventions of social media, such as the "duck face" (pursing the lips in a selfie), the "ab-shot," and food (Figure 1F). The panel says, "It is actually funny seeing it through my perspective." Aubrey anticipated a laugh from her audience, and she got it during the oral presentation. Interwoven

Figure 1F

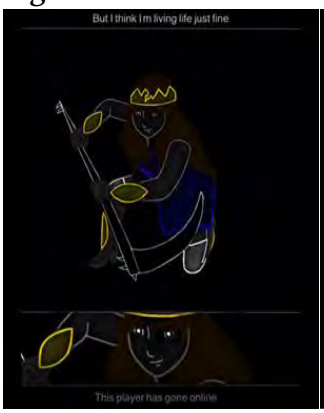


Figure 1G

into the humor and familiar conventions was the revelation that not having a phone can be an isolating experience. As she said in the panel that opened this article, "It is almost like I am offline."

The story ends with the narrator going online, assuming an avatar from a popular video game, Skyrim (Figure 1G). Aubrey described the experience: "I feel like when I'm in a game, it's like I want to be that person in the game, so I should be who I am." This last page brings the offline/online metaphor full circle. Aubrey also made the colors brighter and portrayed the narrator as happy and in control. The second panel is a close-up of her bright eyes and smiling face.

As she ended her presentation a flurry of hands went up. Most of the questions were about the technical aspects, such as the digital drawing. A self-identified artist, Aubrey looked pleased with the reception of her project. One student wrote in her reflection on Aubrey's presentation, "I would say I loved it, how she drew all the pics and connected them." Still another noted that "she told her perspective through a story."

It is also worth noting that – in spite of the fact that Mrs. Kelly and Aubrey were part of a more affluent high school – technology was limited. This shortcoming created challenges. Students had to do the majority of the composing outside school and bring screenshots or use phones to share their products-in-progress with peers. Mrs. Kelly had to arrange a two-week window for unfiltered internet access through various channels so that students could present their projects in class. Although the lack of technology was a problem for Mrs. Kelly, she did not see it as insurmountable. Furthermore, because she was committed to the idea of the DSP, and especially to student choice and relevant curriculum, she persevered in spite of uncertainties, such as how to assess the DSP.

"How Do We Assess this Thing?": Taking a Closer Look

Teachers are often reluctant to include diverse media projects because of the difficulty in assessing unfamiliar genres of digital writing (Hicks, 2015). In other instances, teachers meet the demands of grading or dilemmas stemming from increased student choice by assigning multimodal projects of a similar "type" for simplicity (Shipka, 2009). However, this was not the case for the DSP. Mrs. Kelly invited students to use any media or mode that would meet their rhetorical aims, but not without trepidation, and rightfully so. As Hillocks (2003) argued, a scripted curriculum with a limited range of essay formats will inherently narrow students' and teachers' thinking about what counts as good writing. In turn, with standardized rubrics as a basis for evaluation, the focus on prescribed forms becomes even more narrow. To put it another way, in Mrs. Kelly's handwritten notes, a succinct statement of both excitement and fear sums up her thinking: "How do we assess this thing?"

A student-centered assessment addressed this problem by drawing on the expertise of students and their own knowledge of various genres (Figure 3). As a class, Mrs. Kelly and her students analyzed projects from the previous year to develop umbrella criteria for the contracts: writing, creativity, and effort. They also brainstormed specific criteria, knowing that they could be changed to fit the modes they used for individual DSP projects. Using the criteria as a framework, students explored how they could use exemplar texts to inform their own projects. Additionally, Mrs. Kelly's students participated in self-grading and reflection. During presentations, Mrs. Kelly said she also learned more about the students' rhetorical intentions, which helped her better understand projects that might not be as successful as Aubrey's digital comic. Therefore, co-constructed contracts created a space for consensus

Figure 3

Assessment Contract Sample:* Ideas for Digital Self Portrait Contract Terms

In order to get an A on my Digital Self Portrait I will…

- Post a working link to my project on Edmodo no later than _____

Writing:

- I will include _____ amount of writing (number of posts, length of writing, word count, etc.)
- My writing will be free of mechanical errors.
- My writing will reflect my theme of _____
- My writing will include stylistic features like _____, _____, _____, and _____ (include as many as you like)
- The content of my writing will be reflective by…(sharing my passions/interests/hobbies/important people/mistakes/areas of growth/desires & dreams/things that make me happy; telling stories about important experiences; revealing aspects of my life that no one knows; allowing myself to be vulnerable in the content I share, etc.)

  _____ points

Creativity:

- I will show creativity by _____ (ideas might include: arranging my photos to parallel a unique vision, including colorful images, applying unique filters to my photos to reflect my mood, layout, illustrating my images, connecting my images and writing in meaningful ways, including a variety of stylistic features in my writing, choosing unique quotes that reflect complex ways of thinking, making my own pins, adding humor, adding transitions and effects to the editing, writing my own script/song/poetry, taking a new spin on an old idea, including multiple elements of self, etc.)

  _____ points

Effort:

- I will demonstrate effort by _____ (ideas might include: ensuring clear recordings/videos that are free of background noises or distracting sounds, the number of pictures or length of writing, the amount of filming & editing, customizing my blog/website to be aesthetically pleasing through colors/images/fonts/structure, taking my writing through multiple revisions, connecting all photos/writing/fonts/colors to my theme, length of video, clean images/illustrations/videos with no errors, taking all the pictures myself, including at least XX number of posts/images/captions, learning XYZ program to create a videogame, etc.)

  _____ points

*From Canady, Martin, & Scott 2018

to evolve between student and teacher on expectations for each project.

It is not common practice to invite students to adjust the terms of their assessments (Penrod, 2005). In assessment of digital multimodal composition, teachers still rely on print-based definitions of literacy that do not properly assess the unique affordances of multimodality (Jacobs, 2013).

Furthermore, conventional assessments do not reflect students' authentic digital practices and therefore lack a certain "life validity" (Mills, 2010, p. 262) or connections to digital practices outside of school. Given all of these challenges, it is no surprise that Mrs. Kelly shared the reluctance of many other teachers to assess digital writing (Hicks, 2015). If teachers ask their students to experiment with digital genres, they have to be prepared to experiment with assessment (Charlton, 2014).

Mrs. Kelly and Fawn revised instructional support for students based on the protocol of "Looking Closely." "Looking Closely" frames discussions around student work in a non-evaluative way, and they modeled their inquiry after Hicks's (2015) three types of questions:

- What do you see/notice [in this students' digital writing]?
- What is working [for you as a reader] in this piece/composition?
- What does it make you wonder/what questions does it raise [about the student, the teacher, the curriculum, etc.]? (p. 16)

They found it especially important to "shift from an evaluative stance to a descriptive stance" (Hicks, 2015, p. 7). In contrast to typical evaluation of student writing where teachers are generally holding student work up to a specific standard and looking for what is missing, the act of "looking closely" invites teachers to name what is good about a piece of writing. Moreover, this shift created the space for Mrs. Kelly and Fawn to ask critical questions that moved their thinking about digital texts forward (Hicks, 2015).

Still, during the sessions of looking closely at Mrs. Kelly's students' work, new revelations came up that she had missed before. Students also made new connections in their post-project reflections. Together, Mrs. Kelly and her students enacted a shift in the curriculum and culture of the classroom. In many ways, taking this step was like crossing an invisible line. Mrs. Kelly took the chance and, though it got messy at times, she and her students found common ground. Teachers considering open-ended DMC projects that rely on student expertise may want to consider the following reflections drawn from our experiences with the project.

Walking the Walk: Bridging the DMC Divide in English Language Arts

This article opened with the 10th grade students in Mrs. Kelly's Pre-AP class watching intently in the dim light as Aubrey presented her project. This was the second time Mrs. Kelly had done the DSP with her students and it went much smoother than the first. The last time she had introduced the project to students, the scene had not been nearly so serene. In fact, it produced a near mutiny. On that fateful April day of the prior year, Mrs. Kelly's Assistant Principal, Ms. Parker, also popped in. Mrs. Kelly described the students' response to the DSP this way:

> They were sooooo freaked out! And I just felt absolutely bombarded, attacked by all of the questions. And it freaked me out, and luckily, I had no choice but to maintain composure and be like, "It's going to be great!"

Even before she had introduced the project to her class, Mrs. Kelly had to seek approval, creating tension between her and her peers, as well as with her administration. The first time Mrs. Kelly pitched the DSP idea to her grade-level planning team, they

opted out and questioned her about the project. The administration emphasized close collaboration among the team members, so Mrs. Kelly had to take her plans, and our plans for research, to her supervisor, Ms. Parker. Ms. Parker expressed concerns about preparing students for AP Language and Composition. Furthermore, she predicted that the guidelines in the first iteration of the project were too vague and would frustrate students accustomed to playing by the rules in school, hence Mrs. Kelly's anxiousness about what Ms. Parker witnessed in her classroom.

Making New Media Moves in Writing Curriculum

The pressure to keep abreast of new media literacies in the ELA classroom is not a new development. In fact, one hundred years of *English Journal* articles reveal an ongoing engagement with emergent technologies beyond print where teachers are engaging students in analyzing and producing new media texts (Hicks et al., 2012; McCorkle & Palmeri, 2016). Yet, in spite of evidence that educators seize new media moments, educators are still not taking full advantage of technology in meaningful ways in order to leverage in-depth literacy practices around digital literacies that fundamentally re-conceptualize ELA classrooms (Hicks & Turner, 2013). When it comes to DMC in traditional ELA curriculum, it does not have to be a matter of either/or, but instead, both/and. As Mrs. Kelly said, educators walk a thin line. But, as it is with a tightrope, tension in education is essential.

"When it comes to [digital multimodal composition] in traditional ELA curriculum, it does not have to be a matter of either/or, but instead, both/and."

As researchers, we acknowledge differences between new media writing and traditional composition; however, teachers already have tools at their disposal to engage students with multiple literacies. In spite of her initial ambivalence toward the use of social media for the DSP, Aubrey normalized both social and academic language/norms in her digital writing. Digital writing had not only transformed the students' perspectives, but also had also transformed her. For example, Aubrey's successful use of conventions specific to social media, such as hashtags and abbreviations (e.g., "kys" for "kill yourself") to communicate her perspective, demonstrated that she could use verbal and visual language to great effect for specific audiences and purposes. Mrs. Kelly had also recognized their digital fluency when she said her students were "already doing this" and were "already writers." And though Aubrey's story was one of alienation in the beginning, she ultimately came to the conclusion that "I think I am living life just fine." Mrs. Kelly also learned to listen to her gut instincts, trust in her knowledge of her students, and build on what they were already doing in order to make meaningful connections to the curriculum on their terms.

Lessons Learned and Future Iterations

In formative experiments, reflection and iteration are elemental (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). The tensions or challenges of the DSP intervention were illustrated in Aubrey's experiences and those of Mrs. Kelly.

After the second iteration, Mrs. Kelly and Fawn identified immediate gaps and followed up with instruction ranging from a lesson in visual culture to more explicit connections between lived literacies and school-sanctioned ones in subsequent units of study. More in-depth explorations of the DSP from the findings in the larger study are currently in process. Still, we offer three recommendations from our collective experiences for teachers considering taking that first step in moving past "what we already

know" toward integrating student-centered DMC: Embrace play, create space, and establish trust.

1. Play: Experimentation develops resilience and cultivates curiosity. It creates a culture where making mistakes is an integral part of the learning process. In practice, this looks like student-directed genre studies, peer conferencing, and rubrics that are co-constructed between students and teachers.
2. Space: Physical, virtual, and psychic room for exploring intersections in DMC is essential to allow for serendipitous discoveries and to identify opportunities for instruction and/or mentoring. Space also supports student agency by providing freedom of choice. Beginning the school year with the DSP created these kinds of spaces by communicating to students that their lived literacies have merit and are relevant in this context.
3. Trust: The ELA expertise teachers already possess is more than enough to support students' explorations of the rhetoric of "new" and "old" media. Trust in your students to fill in the gaps *with* you. In Mrs. Kelly's classroom, she learned to leverage her expertise "just in time" by learning about multimedia alongside her students. Deep reflection after the DSP also revealed more opportunities, such as the necessity for visual rhetoric or examinations of how images communicate meaning in different contexts for various audiences and purposes.

Each of these elements is most visible in the projects students created in the second iteration. In the first iteration, Mrs. Kelly said that almost half of her students simply replicated, unthinkingly, what they already did on social media, most notably when using Instagram. She called this reproduction the "carousel effect," referring to the old-school photo carousels that projected photographic images. As students clicked from picture to picture, she and Fawn realized that more intentional instruction about multimodal composition, especially visual composition, was necessary. This emphasis meant that more, not less, space was necessary for students to explore their everyday use in order for opportunities to be identified for instructional support. Because Mrs. Kelly did not use social media, she also needed room for play and space to see how the various genres worked in practice in order to apply her expertise in rhetoric and composition. This flexibility called for a considerable amount of trust between her and her students.

In the end, the Assistant Principal thought that the DSP satisfied expectations for inclusion in a rigorous Pre-AP curriculum, and that the project was pretty cool. After what felt like mayhem the first time Mrs. Kelly introduced the project, she recalled how Ms. Parker approached her after class: Fortunately, Mrs. Kelly's Assistant Principal said, "Thank you! That was awesome! I love the fact that kids were struggling with it."

In spite of the challenges, or because of them, teachers like Mrs. Kelly and students like Aubrey can walk the line, making meaningful connections between their lives and the ELA classroom. The dissonance stemming from the meeting of these two worlds – in- and out-of-school – can be productive. Teachers like Mrs. Kelly might find that students' use of language is complementary to the conventions of academic writing. Recognizing that they are "already writers" whose sophisticated use of semiotic resources reflects rhetorical strategies, such as audience and purpose, is a starting place for a greater understanding of multiple modes and genres in writing.

Aubrey's experiences show that students can also draw on various resources and experiences to successfully navigate school sanctioned writing. Shifts in practice occur when teachers trust students

to take ownership of writing in all of its forms. When empowered to do so, we believe that student writers can find creative opportunities for multimedia composing and can, to use Aubrey's language, go online.

Notes

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