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## Where writing happens: Elevating student writing and developing voice through digital storytelling

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About the Author

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Where Writing Happens: Elevating Student Writing Through Digital Storytelling



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“Do you call people who write digital stories ‘authors’?” – Claire

And so begins a conversation about creating digital stories in Clara Vera’s high school class. Her students are participating in a process that Clara deems invaluable for her students’ literacy development: writing, critiquing, and employing technology as a tool of expression. What began as in interesting proposition, “Why don’t we try to make movies with students so that they can tell their stories, name their experiences?” evolved into an inquiry of students grappling with how to portray themselves in multiple mediated environments and through the written and reflected word. Calkins (1994) describes the benefit of writing in that it “allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it” (4), to essentially examine lived experiences and share these with others. What surfaces from this project are the tensions that exist in making such work public, and the challenges students experience in developing stories of self after spending a decade learning to write to stilted prompts for standardized tests.

This paper documents the progress of my work with a teacher and her secondary journalism students producing digital stories in the spring of 2011, in partnership with the National Writing Project. The work was both challenging and exciting – challenging because of the multiple drafts and media involved in the process; exciting because for the first time all year, Clara witnessed students fully engaged in writing as a process (Atwell 1998; Tompkins 2011) rather than a chore. What follows are the steps that Clara and I followed while working with students, excerpts from students’ writing, and their reflections on the process. Also included is what we learned about students by writing side-by-side with them, first on paper and then mediated through digital spaces. We discovered that where writing happens is *not* just the English classroom, as many secondary teachers might assume. And, if we want to increase students’ efficacy in writing, it could be useful to look for alternate spaces for writing to occur so that students can better examine their lived experiences, find their voices, and strengthen their writing.

The Roots of Digital Storytelling

An increasing body of research is surfacing about the power of digital storytelling as a pedagogical and learning tool for developing student writers (Dreon, Kerper, and Landis 2011; Hull and Katz 2006; Kajder 2004; Ohler, December 2005/ January 2006; Robin 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman 2010). Defining digital storytelling is a complex endeavor; typically digital stories include two distinct processes. First, authors write (or type up) a story they want to convey and that they suspect could be matched well with images, music, video, or audio. Authors go through a writing and revising process to hone the story into a short and tightly knit piece and record themselves reading it. Using movie making software like FinalCut Pro, Moviemaker, or imovie, authors drop in the recording and then enhance this by adding images, music, etc. to deepen the viewers’ experience and understanding of the story. With increasingly available movie-making programs arriving in students’ schools and homes, digital storytelling projects are effective on two levels: expanding students’ understandings and use of the writing process (describe in greater detail later in this piece); and, helping students explore their lives in a medium that is conversely both familiar and strange.

Researchers (Dreon, et al. 2011; Kajder 2004; Ohler, December 2005/January 2006) have written extensively about the process of making movies with students, largely drawn from the work of Joe Lambert (2009) and the Center for Digital Storytelling (2011). Bull and Kajder (2004) and Robin (2008) delineate the Seven Elements [more recently called the “Seven Steps,” by Lambert (2009, xiii)] that include:

| Step                           | Description  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. Point (of view)             | The story the author is attempting to relate through the movie-making process.   |
| 2. Dramatic Question           | This creates tension and sustains the viewer’s attention.  |
| 3. Emotional Content           | This universalizes the experience and helps the viewer connect with the digital story.                                   |
| 4. The Gift of Your Voice      | Our voices convey who we are.  |
| 5. The Power of the Soundtrack | Music and sound effects undergird and strengthen the story.  |
| 6. Economy                     | The use of a short enough written text and related multimedia keep the audience interested without dragging on too long. |
| 7. Pacing                      | Both pauses and movement help pace the movie and make it easier to understand.   |

These steps are invaluable in providing a roadmap for the writing process in a digital environment, and offering guidance for students while developing, audio-taping, and piecing together their digital stories.

A second line of research considers the necessity of connecting digital story production with standards and academic skills (Dreon, et al. 2011) in order to strengthen students’ literacy practices. Ohler (December 2005/January 2006) affirms, “digital stories provide powerful media literacy learning opportunities because students are involved in the creation and analysis of the media in which they are immersed” and tap “dormant skills” that might otherwise not surface in a non-digital classroom (47). In terms of combining visual images and written text, Bull and Kajder (2004) and Burmark’s (2004) work suggest that students’ comprehension is augmented by the blending of the two, which show promise in strengthening the skills of students who struggle in the literacy classroom.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for using digital storytelling is its potential to foster power and develop “agentive senses of self” (Hull and Katz 2006) among teachers and students. Hull and Katz spent multiple years working with youth and young adults in a community technology center, where participants wrote together, participated in writing process workshops to refine their work, and then created digital shorts from these pieces. They document “turning points” (Bruner 1994, 42) during the digital storytelling process and detail “how the opportunity to be successful as a learner and doer can foster a view of self as agent, able to influence present circumstances and future possibilities” (71). This development of students as agents in their own learning was particularly important to Clara, who found some of her language learners reticent to tell their stories both during in-class writings or through blog posts documenting the school community and their place within it. Having read Lambert (2009) and thinking about how students negotiate multiple identities, she pointed out a passage from his book as justification for the digital storytelling project:

The only real way to know about someone is through story, and not one consistent story, but a number of little stories that can adjust to countless different contexts. As we improvise our ways through our multiple identities, any tool that extends our ability to communicate information about ourselves to others becomes invaluable (15).

Yancey (2004) acknowledges, “Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change. Even inside of school, never before have writing and composing generated such diversity in definition. What do our references to writing mean? Do they mean print only?” (298). By giving students the opportunity to express their stories in digital formats, we are in many ways meeting students in their preferred environment and possibly making the production of writing more engaging and interesting. It seems possible that the marriage of technology and storytelling could help develop students’ ability to read and write more effectively, by hiding the work inside the production of a movie-making endeavor. And as we consider what literacy – reading, writing, listening, speaking, researching – will look like as technology becomes more widespread in public schools, it is important to consider how these tools can be harnessed for both learning and as a source of fun.

### A Push to Focus on Adolescent Literacy

In recent years, calls for the improvement of adolescent literacy in American public schools have reached critical mass, and for good reason. It is estimated that as many as 70 percent of secondary students struggle with literacy in some way (Biancarosa and Snow, 2006, 8); these problems range from a difficulty with fluency to an absence of comprehension strategies when engaged with increasingly difficult texts. As a result, while National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores have improved modestly for students in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade over the past several years, students tested at the 8<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade years are exhibiting little or no progress (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy 2010). Given that students today must learn both to understand and critique text in order to further their aspirations post-high school, it is necessary that adolescents “use and practice literacy to navigate and manipulate both popular culture, academic culture, and the world of work” (Moje 2002, 212). In tandem with this obligation is the responsibility to meet the demands of increasing standardization, including performing well on high stakes tests and engaging with the Common Core State Standards. It is no surprise that a recent Carnegie report on adolescent literacy acknowledges that “our schools are systematically failing to provide many students with the guidance, instruction, and practice” (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy 2010) to develop proficiency in a host of interrelated literate practices (defined as “the way in which students are taught to read, comprehend, and write,” across the school day (viii).

As a result, educators face a moral imperative to cultivate the literacy skills that will help students realize their full potential both in and out of schools, and through print and digital environments. As our definitions of literacy expand to include divergent and rapidly changing media, teachers are also tasked with striking a balance between helping students develop the technological prowess necessary to read and write in 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms, while keeping reading and writing events relevant and valuable to students’ lives. It is the blending of these competing forces – the development of written work that allows students to examine their lived experiences (Freire 2005) and the nourishment of the “functional tools” (Selber 2004), those necessary to succeed in increasingly complex technological environments, that are at the heart of this research project. Details about the study as well as its results follow.

### Methodology

This project represents a partnership between the National Writing Project (NWP), a professor, and a Central Texas English/journalism teacher. After receiving a mini-grant from the NWP Urban Sites Network to assist in purchasing computer equipment like cameras, digital recorders, headphones, and memory sticks, I (a university professor of reading/literacy

education) approached several NWP-affiliated English teachers to gauge their interest in creating digital stories with middle and high school students to augment the traditional approaches of developing student writing their schools were using. Our goal was to infuse creativity and innovation into what was in many of the schools a “bland and scripted” writing process curriculum (C. Vera, personal communication, March 20, 2010). The focus of this article is English and journalism teacher Clara Vera and her students at Central High School, a culturally and linguistically diverse school within a large urban school district. Over a third (34%) of the student population at Central High School comes from economically disadvantaged homes. A bit more than half of the student population is non-white; 8% are African American and 44% are Latino according to the most recent state agency report. These demographics roughly reflect the students involved in the digital storytelling project. Of the fifteen in her Journalism I course, two were African American, four were Latino, and nine were White. Two were international students with complete fluency in English; one was formerly in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses prior to coming to Central High School.

Central High School is one of the oldest schools in the district and has a long history of drawing from some of the wealthiest homes in the area. More recently, with the alteration of attendance zones Central now serves larger numbers of middle and lower income families, occasionally creating conflict among students. Those at Central High School typically perform well on state-mandated tests; reporting data from the 2009-2010 school year show that 94% of students (in combined grade levels) passed the reading and language arts portions of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) end of year exams (Texas Education Agency 2010). What goes unacknowledged by state reporting are the burgeoning numbers of Spanish-dominant language learners at Central High School and the school’s increasing concern with how to serve such students.

In early conversations with Clara about how she might shape this project, we discussed the importance of drawing out the voices of all of her students, not just those who were often favored at Central High School – namely those from wealthier, White homes. Clara saw the language learners of the school “rendered voiceless in the world at large” (Bomer 1999, 2) at Central by the pedagogical decisions of school and district personnel in their attempts to increase scores on high-stakes tests. Originally, I posed the idea of making digital stories to several other English teachers on campus to participate in the project; we were dismissed by several over concerns of time commitment and a feeling of pressure to “cover” the curriculum. The resultant work reflects a case study approach that documents the process of digital storytelling, student reflections, drafts of scripts and other elements of the writing process, and the students’ final film shorts.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The case study described here is part of a larger study involving three teachers in two separate school districts, and spanning the 2010-2011 school year. Using purposeful sampling (Merriam 1998), the teachers – each of whom are affiliated with the National Writing Project – were selected in part based on their stated commitment to equity and culturally appropriate teaching practices (Villegas and Lucas, 2002) and their receptiveness to notions of progressive teaching and critical theory (hooks 1994; Morell 2008). While each of the participating teachers employed digital stories for a variety of purposes (to inform, to explain, to reflect), the work at Central High School seemed to stand out in terms of offering the most benefit to students on both an academic and personal level.

This paper draws from three separate pools of data to develop the portraits that follow. Data from Clara includes: (a) planning conversations before, during, and after the project; (b) handouts and activities that structured the process; (c) personal correspondence, such as email and text messages; and (d) samples of Clara’s own writing that occurred throughout the project’s span. Data from students includes: (a) brainstorming and written work developed from seed ideas (Buckner 2005); (b) reflections produced before, during, and after their development of digital stories; (c) informal conversations with students during the writing and movie-making process; (d) written transcripts of students’ digital stories; and (e) the digital versions of the stories produced by the class. A third set of data includes notes from an observation journal I kept throughout the project and samples of my own work while participating in class writing activities. The latter were invaluable in serving as a reminder of Clara’s pedagogical decisions and the activities and efforts employed to develop student writing.

Interview transcripts with Clara and field notes about the process helped surface questions and wonderings that we looped back to after the completion of the project. Because Clara and I have known one another for many years – since she was a high school student and I was a classroom teacher – we have developed a short-hand in our conversations and are similarly allied in promoting a pedagogy of social justice and liberation (Freire 2005). These notions were a regular part of our discussions throughout the digital storytelling process and helped shape the themes represented in this article. The collection of lesson plan ideas and student artifacts were on-going throughout the 2010-2011 school year, and subsequently analyzed inductively using guidelines delineated by Huberman and Miles (1983). Triangulation of multiple data sources (such as observation notes, lesson plans, student reflections and drafts, and interviews) was built into data collection and analysis for the purposes of achieving trustworthiness.

Through an examination of the writing process, the ensuing negotiations with technological tools, and the digital stories themselves, this portrait offers a roadmap for educators interested in working on similar projects with students or other teachers. Additionally, this seeks to document the efficacy of digital storytelling as an effective tool for developing students’ capacity to express their lived experiences while concurrently cultivating the writing and multimedia skills students need to flourish in media-rich technological worlds.

Findings

In the section that follows, I include detailed descriptions of the digital storytelling process as Clara and her students completed their projects and their ensuing fears, frustrations, and successes. I begin with how students engaged with both the viewing/reading of digital stories available online and relate this to the writing process employed by most writing teachers. I then include details of the challenges the students and Clara confronted while using technology as a classroom tool. Finally, I discuss the possibility and potential for using digital storytelling as a means of developing student voices and agency inside schools.

Engaging With the Process

*“The thing most difficult about this project is finding something to write mostly, then getting started and putting it together.” –Jose*

As is noted earlier, the writing focus for most students in secondary schools in our state is that which is tested on end-of-year, high stakes exams. The tests have varied over the years; an earlier push toward persuasive writing evolved into narrative and synthesis essays. The common element across the grade levels is the appearance prompts that guide student writing. This limiting of student writing to “what is testable” (Bomer 2006, 366) seems to have produced an unintended consequence: a diminishing capacity for students to create writing sans the prompt. Clara and I noticed early on that students floundered when confronted with choices – given the option of writing about whatever they wanted served to stymie many student writers. We used writing process methods familiar to students, asking them to brainstorm ideas that they developed over time, write, revise, edit, with the intention of publishing that work mediated by digital tools – the movies. Clara’s student Kristen acknowledged how difficult it was to get started in an early reflection noting, “I think that the most difficult thing is finding a story. I really want it to be the perfect story that explains everything in a short time.”

To ameliorate this, Clara asked students to view several digital stories from the Center for Digital Storytelling web site to get ideas for their own writing (<http://www.storycenter.org/stories/index.php?cat=5>). She instructed students to document things they liked and didn’t like while watching each story, and consider what additional enhancements – music, images, embedded video – contributed to the story’s message or theme. The class constructed a rubric to gauge the effectiveness of stories they viewed, which later served as a guide as they developed their own work. Students agreed that some of the movies were too long, had problems with narration, and in the case of one that Sophie viewed, “didn’t have a purpose.” They acknowledged that personal stories were effective, but as Marisol pointed out “You don’t want to get to a point where [the story] is so personal you can’t tell it, but you don’t want it to be dull.” After engaging with digital “texts,” and offering several opportunities for students to writer freely, Clara introduced the Topic Graph to assist those still struggling to nail down a subject.

Topic Graph

Fill out the Topic Graph to the best of your ability. In each block, use short phrases or trigger words that come to mind when you think of the particular event. Under mood and color, just put the first word that comes to mind.

| Topic   | Personal Subject | Image | Mood | Color | Lesson Learned |
|---|------------------|-------|------|-------|----------------|
| A person who changed your life                          |                  |       |      |       |                |
| Earliest childhood memory                               |                  |       |      |       |                |
| The member of your family that causes you the most pain |                  |       |      |       |                |
| A special place   |                  |       |      |       |                |
| Something you saved                                     |                  |       |      |       |                |
| A dream you had   |                  |       |      |       |                |

When you are finished completing the chart, choose one of the events to write about in detail. Write 1-2 pages on a separate sheet of paper. Be prepared to read your favorite paragraph to your partner.

Because of the broadness of the ideas on the graph (example: “something you saved”), students interpreted the topics in a variety of ways. Claire wrote briefly about saving a cat; Chantelle a love note; others wrote about jewelry now lost. While most seemed bolstered by these earlier activities and got right to work, Jose – one of two Latino students in Clara’s class, who was a language learner upon his entry to the district years before – spent time listening to music, trying not to draw attention to himself. After a few visits to the class, Clara asked me to encourage him to work. Jose and I discussed possible subjects like music, interests he had outside of school, or selected one of the ideas he generated on his Topic Graph, like his first dog or winning president of his class in elementary school. These topics did not sustain his interest, and when Jose wrote, it often took

him “ten minutes to get one sentence down” (C. Vera, interview, June 9, 2011). When he told me, “I don’t like school – this is boring” I suggested that he write about his experiences in school or what he would change about how schools were set up to better accommodate students. This caught his attention, and Jose haltingly began to write.

Engaging also included participating in the writing process (Romano 2000), and in reading, reviewing, revising, and talking about their work. We were all participants in the process, writing together, sharing ideas, and serving as readers. This became a useful tool for Marisol; unlike Jose, she had many ideas and wrote three separate pieces as possible material for her digital short. While conferencing with Kristen and Melinda, she read her pieces aloud to them. The girls responded, “Read them again!” which pleased and embarrassed Marisol. Clara elaborates

She read it and they helped her pick which one and why they thought this piece was more accessible, [why they] liked the topic. They asked her “Which one would you feel more comfortable with?” It created a lot of accountable talk and part of that was I think – you and me being in there, modeling so that students knew what it looked like. I heard them tell each other, “I liked that, why don’t you try this?” (C. Vera, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

After students winnowed their pieces down to roughly 500-700 words, which would aid in keeping movies a manageable length, we had them map out their work in “storyboard” format using a template created by the Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2007). This process helps movie-makers organize the sensory elements of the movie, and to consider what viewers will see and hear while watching it. An additional benefit to this stage of the process is it helped students “consider how effects, transitions, and sound would be sequenced” (Kajder 2004, 66) and how these contribute to the larger effect of the story. Students exhibited a noticeable persistence throughout the engaging process, and enacted several of the steps of the writing process including brainstorming, drafting, and revising. Having written the stories, mapped them out, and begun the process of gathering photos and images, we were ready to face the largest obstacle in our path: harnessing the technology.

Grappling

*“If I were to do this project again, it would come out a lot better because now I have the experience...when I first started I had no clue.” –Claire*

When I first approached Clara and the other participating teachers about producing digital stories, they were excited about the possibility but held concerns about technology. In her mid-twenties, Clara was well versed in multimedia like most teachers of her generation. She worked on the newspaper in high school and college and had extensive exposure to complex computer applications like PageMaker and the Adobe Suite programs. Clara made a digital story as a requirement for one of her English/ language arts methods courses while learning to teach; she made a second movie to use as a model for her students before beginning this project, using imovie on a MacBook computer. In spite of this proficiency, there was still hesitation and concern. The only computer lab in the school that had movie-making software loaded was a PC lab, and the Adobe Premiere program was new to both of us. Clara prefaced our time together with students in the lab with, “We’re all going to be learning this together. Yes, Author and I have made movies before, but this platform is not what we’ve used. We’re going to have some problems, and it’s going to be fine” (Author, observation, March 31, 2011). Clara’s acknowledgement that challenges lay ahead invited students to work in dialogue in a “problem-posing” environment (Freire 2005, 81) where they could all learn and rely on one another. By positioning students as problem-solvers and making space for those with more skill to serve in a teaching capacity, Clara helped cultivate an equitable space inside the computer lab – one where we all participated as learners and teachers.

Not surprisingly, students with greater technological proficiency stepped up to help those struggling while putting movies together. Like most movie-making programs, ours supplied multiple tracks, where we could drop in the voice-over narration, and add photos, music, and effects on separate tracks. After struggling to record the narrations of the lab computers, Clara brought in another teacher to trouble-shoot. We ended up recording narration tracks for student movies on a MacBook using its Garage Band program, saving this as a music file, and jumping it over to the PC computers to drag onto the narration track. While assisting students with the process, I saw several help each other use a backdoor entry around the school district’s web site blocking software, so that they could access Facebook and grab photographs and other images that they wanted to include in their movies. Although this practice exhibited an infraction of the school rules, none of the students dawdled. Rather, accessing images from Facebook in this case appeared to be just another source – like a jump drive, ipod, or burned CD that students brought to class to transport their information readily (Author, observation, April 12, 2011).

There were hiccups in the process, particularly as we neared the end of the school year and students became pressed to complete movies prior to final exams week. Some of the problems were the result of students’ growing understanding of how to employ the tools they were using to create the digital stories. While most had successfully navigated the process of writing and editing their pieces and gathering supporting materials to enhance the movies themselves, their functional literacy (Selber, 2004) in using the movie-making software was limited. Thus, these limitations produced a logjam in terms of completing and rendering the movies. A few students lost parts of their movies, including background music and photos. After attempting to drop in a short video of her sister singing near the end of her movie, Kristen faced calamity, “the digital story started deleting everything, including both sets of audio” (K. Small, reflection, May 30). After a call to her dad to post additional photos to Facebook, she patiently rebuilt her story. This diligence and persistence were noticeable throughout the group; we regularly heard students remind each other “save your work” and “make sure you have that backed up.”

For a few of the digital stories, we did not discover until after they were rendered that the background music tracks were too loud, drowning out the narrator’s voice. Sophie wrote “the software was frustrating to work, and took a while to the hang of things” (M. Wiatrek, reflection, May 30, 2011). In the case of Marisol’s completed movie, about two minutes into the story the screen goes dark, but you can still hear her narration. We are still uncertain what happened, whether she accidentally deleted photographs or did not stretch them out to match the length of her voice-over recording.

In spite of these difficulties and the imperfections of the completed digital stories, students were pleased with their work. A movie day was held, where students watched digital stories back to back, complimenting and critiquing each other’s work. In lieu of a final exam, Clara asked students to write a reflection that answered the following questions: What did you enjoy and not enjoy about this project? What would you change about your story? What would you change about the process? In the end, were you happy with your work? Kristen’s thought, “It’s been kind of cool learning about a new program and figuring out how to put all these pieces together to make a movie and all of the elements needed for it” (K. Small, reflection, May 30, 2011) encapsulates most of the responses we read from student essays. Melinda acknowledged, “The story just starts to move itself and you end up with something better than you could have ever imagined” (M. Parson, reflection, May 30, 2011). Several of the students noted that they did not enjoy listening to their own voices. Ana worried “I sound different, and strange” (A. Vargas, reflection, May 30, 2011), while Jose “did not enjoy having to listen [sic] to my voice, mostly because it did not sound anything like me.” Jose’s concerns were equally compounded by worries over how his classmates would view his work, acknowledging “The thing I hated was having [sic] to know that the hole [sic] class was going to see it, and even more when they *did* see it (J. Lopez, reflection, May 30, 2011).

We were pleased by students’ reflections about the project. Sophie’s response, “I felt proud of all the work I had put into the process” (S. Wiatrek, reflection, May 30, 2011) mirrored our pride in the students’ diligence and patience with the process. Surprisingly, another common strand encapsulated by Allison also surfaced in student essays. She came closest to realizing one of the original goals of the project included in the grant proposal I wrote that helped fund our work: “The most important thing...was showing how the world looks from my eyes” (A. Stanton, reflection, May 30, 2011).

### Naming

*[In response to the question, “Why do you think stories about ourselves are important to share?”] “So people get to know us better...to know what is really going on with us.” – Courtney*

One of the more powerful aspects of participating in a digital storytelling project is the collaborative nature of the endeavor (Lambert 2009, 47). In our case, collaboration was a necessary part of our work, both in developing and strengthening the written stories and in overcoming obstacles that surfaced in the computer lab, putting the movies together. It was through these shared experiences that a true bond seemed to surface among students, who entrusted each other not only with their stories but also with their vulnerabilities – whether this had to do with their capacity as writers or their proficiency in producing an eye-catching, poignant movie short that resonated with viewers. Students wrote a whole host of short pieces prior to determining which they would focus on for their digital story. What follows are descriptions of stories that afforded students the opportunity to “name their world” (Freire 2005) and for once write about a subject of their choice – and not one constructed as an evaluative tool or prompt for a standardized tests. Clara viewed the creation of digital stories as an opportunity for students to go beyond the written word and look at larger truths in their lives and the world around them. She saw the movies as an opportunity for students to deeply immerse themselves in their writing – something they had less time to do in other classes or on end of the year exams – and felt the movies “amplified the meaning” of students’ pieces by means of music, photographs, video, and voiceover (C. Vera, personal communication, June 7, 2011). What follows are some of the lessons students took away from the process, and in some cases, the deeply personal insights they gained from this collaborative endeavor.

**Kristen and Sophie – Learning about Life.** Like many of the students in Clara’s class, Kristen and Sophie focused on family members for their digital stories. Kristen’s story “Sunshine” starts with a photograph of her younger sister Addie rolling sideways on a rug looking up at the camera. Although there is more than a decade between the two, the narration tells us that Addie has served as a teacher for Kristen in many ways. One example occurred after the death of their family dog. While Kristen and the others were grieving in a ceremony in the backyard Addie, “my little silver lining, came up to all of us, kissed us on the cheek, and told us that it will be okay because Hudson [the dog] is playing with Jesus now.” Images of Addie at home, school, church, and in nature splash across the screen while music from local artists plays in the background. One of the strongest connections that Kristen shares with her little sister is a love of music.

It wasn’t until I watched her [Addie] sing that I understood what music does to people. The best part about listening to her sing is that she does it with such joy. Her face lights up when she hears a song she knows and she sings at the top of her lungs. [Music] changes you and gives you the words when you can’t say anything, and it brings people together. At two years old, Addie was able to comprehend this even before I understood. Rather than finding her younger sibling a burden, Kristen views her as a guiding light and force in her family’s life.

While putting together her digital story, Kristen struggled with how to merge a video clip of her sister singing – which she hoped to use at the end of her movie while the credits were rolling – with the rest of her pictures and narration. At one point, she was forced to dump all of her information – narration, photographs, and the video – and start a new movie file. We never really understood what happened, but this is

emblematic of the challenges that emerge when blending writing with multimedia. Kristen’s final movie did not include Addie’s song, although we had all seen it during production. This caused her some consternation, but did not diminish the effect of Kristen’s story.

Sophie’s movie “Water Races up to My Toes” tricks the viewer initially. As the voiceover describes a time at the beach with her grandfather, the viewer sees images of trees and sunflowers flowing in and out of the screen in an artful manner. There are close-up and fading effects generated from the movie-making software. What follows are images of toys, nature, and ocean scenes; we don’t actually see a picture of the “main character” or images of the beach until we’re a minute into the digital story. Mirroring the composition of images, the narrated story unfolds slowly as well.

Sophie’s grandfather came of age in Communist Poland, later immigrating and working as an engineer in the United States. Like Kristen’s portrait of her sister, Sophie discusses the many lessons she received from time spent together with her grandfather.

He taught me where to find every country on the map and the names of every tree in our favorite park...how to drive a car, and how to be proud of where I am and what I believe in.

Perhaps most poignantly, as the images move to beachscapes, tidal pools, and craggy rocks, there is also mention of her grandfather’s large hands picking up small shells. Among them are hermit crabs and as these are discussed, a hermit crab appears on the screen. It is never overtly mentioned but the hermit crab seems to serve as a metaphor for Sophie’s own flowering from a shy and reticent girl, to how she sees herself today. “I’m not shy anymore. I’ve grown into a young woman with tumultuous troubles, like any other,” the narration continues. The movie ends with a portrait of Sophie panning first on her legs, her midriff, an arm crossing her chest, and then a close-up of her staring into the camera. Finally, we see the smiling portrait of the author; like the hermit crab moving out of its shell in the safety of the water, she exudes a tentative confidence while facing the audience. Background music that ends in a whistle takes us out, while the image of Sophie dissolves into a large oak tree in the background of her portrait.

**Marisol – Visiting Stones.** After narrowing down her choices, Marisol decided to draw from a piece of writing entitled “Flowers for a Stranger” for her digital story. The voiceover begins, “We go every year to visit them. They lie beneath, basking in dirt while they are confined in they’re [sic] eternal beds. The granite stones sit above them.” Quiet piano music plays in the background. Images of cemetery statuary, flowers, and teddy bears placed at gravesites draw the viewer in. As the story progresses, we understand that Marisol feels disconnected from the mourning experience her family engages in and is trying to make sense of these yearly visits. Her narration is calm and somber; images of people crying and hugging appear on the screen. Heaviness builds as she acknowledges, “People cry and I watch. Even the silence hurts. How can I feel something for someone I don’t know?” An image of the Piata appears on the screen as Marisol reveals, “I’ve never shed a tear, and I hate myself for that.” The story ends with a reflection on questions Marisol has posed to her younger sisters about the cemetery visits. She asks them, “What do you feel?” and tells the listener that while hesitant in their responses, her sisters feel similarly, and this offers comfort. “It gives me a sense of belonging. I still feel apart, but at least there’s something to hold onto.” Marisol ends her piece with a metaphor, “I too, am a stone.”

Because *Flowers for a Stranger* touches on a topic that many people are uncomfortable with – death and remembrance – it evoked quite a response from her classmates during their movie viewing day. Many found the digital story dark and were surprised by its effect on them. Students were equally surprised that this work had come from Marisol – largely because she is quiet and unassuming in class and does not discuss herself openly with others. While Marisol’s story focused on family traditions and experiences, it was less a rumination on the lessons learned from others than Sophie and Kristen’s work. In many ways, Marisol’s seemed to involve placing a mirror up to her culture – to her family and their repeated treks to honor the dead – and then examining it and making public this quiet ritual with the predominantly White student population of the class. In spite of a few problems with images not appearing in the final thirty seconds of the story – when you can hear narration, but see nothing but a black screen – the viewers found Marisol’s work “compelling and deep.”

**Jose – Creating the Perfect School.** As is noted earlier, Jose had difficulty finding a topic for his digital story. In addition to the Topic Graph activity, Clara led the class in writing about “tiny moments” in our lives that turn out to have significant resonance as we reflect back on them. She had the class and me write down a list of words, skipping lines between them. Included were: proud, tough, rewind, bird, hair, romance, and awkward. We were then asked to select several of the trigger words to use as a starting point for writing; students (and I) could later develop these into the narratives for our digital stories. Jose responded to only three of the words: proud (“winning school president”); tough (“becomeing [sic] school president in elementary”); and rewind (“Wishing I could [sic] rewind back to middle school moments – the last day of school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade”). Jose wrote a short piece about going to Six Flags (an amusement park in Texas) “with 3 of my homeboys and 2 homegirls. It was gust [sic] us 6 haveing [sic] fun with no parents or other known people.” None of these initial pieces captured his attention enough to elaborate on further. After his complaint to me that school was boring, I asked Jose put this in writing. I asked him, “What would you do differently if you were in charge? How might we change schools to make them less boring?”

It is possible that Jose’s negative experiences in school were tied to his struggles with literacy; looking at his written work, one finds myriad small grammatical mistakes that collectively suggest (later shown to be true) that Jose was a language learner. Having advanced to high school without the requisite skills to find success in grade-level courses, Jose was placed in a low-level English class that focused on test preparation – preparation for something that he characterizes in his digital story as “a test that

I think has no meaning.” Jose’s movie highlights his lived experience as a struggling student. With a background of classical music and images of children and test booklets clipped from the Internet, his narration explains,

All we do in that class is work that comes in a paper with a label that looks like the one on the TAKS test. The only things we do besides that are test and quizzes. To me this tells me that school is a boring thing and that the only things we’re doing is working hard all year to take a test at the end. A test that I think has no meaning.

Jose continues by fleshing out recommendations for a better learning environment for students like him.

My school wooed [sic] be a learn-as-you-can school where you can take a brake [sic] at anytime and come learn when you’re ready as long as you learn what’s necessary...my school wooed [sic] have small classes so it makes it easier to learn in class. There wooed [sic] also be lots of help and assistance by teachers.

He goes on to recommend the incorporation of cutting-edge technology to assist those struggling to learn, including a computer for each student. Unlike most of the students in Clara’s class, who were able to conceive of and develop their movies in discrete parts, Jose was somewhat overwhelmed by the process. His writing seemed hampered by the absence of a prompt, and he acknowledged in his end of the year reflective essay “I was not happy with my story because it was a story that I did not really feel had something to do with me.” He also admitted he would have spent “more time thinking about what to write about” and linking that to pictures and images he had from home to enhance his movie.

Clara and the other students in the class felt differently, talking him up during the movie-viewing day. Students responded to his movie with, “Jose, that’s awesome!” Most of the students – who were in either grade-level of PreAP (Advanced Placement) classes and had not experienced English classes where the entire focus was on test preparation – had a shift in their understanding of Jose, and acknowledged as much. I asked Clara how students viewed Jose prior to his creation of the digital short, and she said that most saw him as shy and non-participatory. When she paired students with him earlier in the year, “They were like, ‘Awww, I’m going to get paired with Jose?’ They were a little apprehensive” (C. Vera, interview, June 9, 2011). In the end, Jose was his worst critic disparaging his voice, the images he clipped from the Internet, and his choice of topic – which he viewed as less personal than other students’ digital stories. Interestingly enough, Jose’s story was actually quite personal, as it documented his daily experience as a student grappling to perform in a school setting that was largely populated by highly successful students. Surfacing this reality seemed to both Clara and me every bit as personal and compelling as the other stories we viewed during our work on this project.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data presented here illustrate the complexity of working with technology as a classroom tool, and also offer promise for developing students as writers and critics of their own (and others’) work – two important skills for success in the literacy classroom and beyond. Much like the participants in Hull and Katz’s (2006) research, students in this study were able to use digital storytelling as a means for vivifying their lived experiences in a world that often silences their interests and stories while favoring prescribed, prompt-based writing. What is most intriguing to me about the digital storytelling process that seems absent from written research is its power to reinforce the writing process without seeming repetitive or heavy-handed to students. Writing requires a persistence and tenacity that adolescents do not always want to employ, particularly in the revision and editing portions of the process. This study suggests that pairing the writing process with technology – as Robin (2008) acknowledges, not for its own sake but rather as a tool to assist learning in other areas – increases students’ capacity for staying interested in the process. Clara’s students produced multiple drafts, engaged in peer mentoring, held discussions about images and sound that would undergird the larger message of their stories, and then went through each of these steps *a second time* as they put together their digital shorts. Even in the face of calamity, as when Kristen lost most of her data and had to begin her movie production anew in the last week of school, students were determined to see their stories through to fruition and participate in the movie-viewing day at school.

The transformation from written, 1-dimensional words on the page to 2-dimensional narration and images on the screen offered a secondary benefit, particularly to Jose who struggled to articulate himself clearly on the written page; the movie essentially erased his grammatical mistakes. I do not wish to minimize Jose’s struggles, but rather use these as an example of why digital storytelling holds promise for assisting struggling learners. Our initial efforts to get Jose to write were met with minimal progress and fear. He had been told repeatedly he was not a good writer, and was wary of sharing work with teachers or other students. Yet the digital storytelling process intrigued him so that he wanted to participate, and made him willing to write enough to show us his work regardless of errors. His first draft was a paragraph; the second was two. Jose stretched this finally into a one-page, single-spaced, typed story appropriately constructed for the voice-over for his movie. This was the longest written piece Clara had received from Jose all year, and the most telling in terms of a diagnostic tool. If she were to pass this writing sample along to another teacher, s/he would have an excellent starting point for assisting Jose in ironing out his writing problems and developing his many strengths.

What this study suggests is that students grow in their understanding of writing by completing multimedia projects, in spite of the noticeable absence of technology use in many classrooms. My work as a teacher and researcher in schools has taught me that English teachers often forgo opportunities like digital storytelling out of fear over time constraints or worries about their personal capacity to engage with technology. The data here suggest that the time commitment is beneficial to students in particular if it includes a collective agreement about: the purpose of the assignment (to tell a multi-dimensional

story); the expected quality of the product (ascertained by students in advance, while learning to critique the work of others); the time commitment (extensive, especially if students are given ample time to write while in class); and the co-construction of knowledge (that students will rely on each other in addition to the teacher to guide them through the process). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect about this data is where the writing happened – not in an English classroom, but rather an introductory journalism class. Freed up from the constraints of an inhibiting curriculum and concerns about time or test preparation, Clara was able to promote writing for its most fundamental purpose: a means of expression and examination of experience.

While this study considers the work of one teacher in one classroom, it is emblematic of the kind of literacy instruction and learning that are imperative for students to gain access to in schools if they are to flourish in our increasingly inter-connected, technological world. In tandem with this kind of teaching, we would benefit from more research that examines such practices as a tool for growth in reading and writing. If we were to welcome in the diverse and interesting voices of students and teachers attempting to harness these new technologies, our field would grow exponentially. Like Clara, teachers (and researchers) exhibit fear in opening that portal; the reality for our students is they have already crossed over the threshold while we are lagging behind them. In her poem, “No ideas but in things” published in *The New Yorker*, Jessica Greenbaum (2011) writes

... We name life  
in relation to whatever we step out from when we  
open the door, and whatever comes back in on its own.

As we move forward in the field of literacy instruction and learning, we might well put aside these fears and consider new ways to teach and study the technologically savvy students of today, lest we find ourselves left behind.

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## Writing and Learning Online: Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Development as Writers and Teachers of Writing

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In the last decade, online learning has moved from the fringes into the mainstream as a viable approach to higher education. The number of college courses and full-degree programs offered online continues to grow rapidly. One survey found over 60% of institutions in the United States offer fully online degrees and around 32% of students take at least one course online (Allen and Seaman 4). Recently, faculty in the elementary and middle grades program made the decision to move our Master of Arts degree (M.A.Ed.) to a completely online format, joining our already fully online post-baccalaureate program, which is designed for students who are seeking initial licensure in middle grades but already hold a bachelor’s degree in a field other than education. As we began this transition, we wondered about the influence on our students’ learning in our graduate-level literacy courses. Specifically, we wanted to focus on our online graduate course in elementary and middle grades writing pedagogy because of the increased attention to writing that the Common Core State Standards bring for K-12 teachers (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 10) coupled with research indicating that teachers are underprepared to teach writing (e.g., Graham and Wosley 348; Street and Stang “Improving the Teaching” 37).

As in our face-to-face classes, this course required students to write extensively based on the premise that teachers of writing should be writers themselves (Atwell 18; Augsburg 548-552; Graves 36; “About NWP”; Routman 35-50; Watts 155); however, because the predominant method of communication, collaboration, and shared understanding in this online course was also in written format, the amount of writing students completed extended well beyond our typical expectations. Given the writing pedagogy content and the online context of the course, we wondered what changes in beliefs and perceptions would occur for the graduate students participating in the course. The purpose of this paper is to share what we learned about the changes in self-perception and how these teachers developed as writers and teachers of writing after completing our course. While it is not within the scope of this paper to explain how to design an online course, several useful sources are dedicated to this topic including current articles (Andrew and Arnold 110-111; Singleton-Jackson and Colella online) and more in-depth books on the subject (Ko and Rossen; Warnock).

#### Relevant Literature

Teachers’ beliefs in their ability to teach writing are shaped, in part, by their perception of themselves as writers, and both positive and negative experiences affect this perception (Daisey 161). Those who are anxious about their own writing abilities struggle with teaching writing, and lacking confidence means a higher likelihood of giving up when faced with student writing challenges (Bratcher and Stroble 83; Pajares and Johnson 326; Street and Stang “Teacher Education Courses” 83). Teachers’ personal beliefs about their own writing shortfalls can lead to reluctance about teaching certain concepts. For example, Hall and Grisham-Grown found that pre-service teachers who struggled with conventions were hesitant to teach about them (156). Additionally, if teachers think that writing is a talent rather than a learned skill, it influences the value they place on writing instruction (Norman and Spencer 34). Conversely, when teachers have ample opportunities to be successful writers and receive formal preparation on writing instruction, they feel more positive and confident about teaching writing (Chambless and Bass, 159).

How people perceive their own competence is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy, or a person’s belief that he/she is capable of achieving a specific goal (Bandura 3). As one researcher explains, “[Self-efficacy beliefs] influence the choices people make and the course of action they pursue. Most people engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not” (Pajares). Self-efficacy affects motivation, achievement, and attitude (Ashton and Webb; Brown; Graham and Weiner, 75; Guskey) and plays a role in how teachers teach writing. For example, teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adapt instruction for struggling writers than those who lack confidence in their ability to change student behaviors (Troia, Lin, Cohen, and Monroe 177). Similarly, self-efficacy helps teachers overcome challenges that they face as writing teachers, such as reaching reluctant writers (Tracy and Headley 182).

When teachers have opportunities to learn to teach writing among “supportive and committed colleagues,” their perceptions of themselves as writers can evolve, and they can gain confidence in their ability to write and to teach writing (Street and Stang “Teacher Education Courses” 91). These sorts of communities can be accomplished within graduate courses (Street and Stang, “Improving the Teaching” 43), including those that are taught in part or completely online through sharing of personal experiences on blogs and discussion boards, frequent feedback loops between students as well as instructors, and