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Five Secondary Teachers’ Developing Identities as Teachers of Digital Writing

Brad Jacobson, University of Texas at El Paso

“I think we’re still in the midst of that, where we should be experimenting. That’s one of the reasons why I really want to pursue this digital literacy thing because I think it’s something that came out and was just highlighted during quarantine and should be implemented heavily. I think it’s a new avenue [as] opposed to what we’ve been doing.”

–Jay, secondary ELA teacher

More than a decade ago, McDougall (2010) identified a “crisis of professional identity” among elementary teachers negotiating expanding views of literacy as a region of Australia implemented a new media curriculum. McDougall found some teachers excited about this more “future-oriented” learning, while others were more resistant to the change. All teachers, McDougall writes, had to navigate competing institutional and cultural expectations that made it “increasingly difficult to stipulate what the core responsibilities of the primary teacher might be” (p. 686): teachers still felt an obligation—both internal and from external pressures—to teach “traditional” literacy and numeracy while also introducing new literacies. Without clarity about and support for their developing teaching roles, McDougall suggested, teachers would continue to struggle to negotiate their professional identities as literacy teachers in changing times.

There remains a need for examining teacher identity development in an era of continuous technological change. As Jay, the secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teacher quoted in the epigraph of this article, implies, the recent focus on digital teaching and learning during and after the covid-19 pandemic and widespread remote learning has seemingly opened new possibilities for expanding digital writing opportunities. Jay expressed a desire to explore this “new avenue,” in part, because he did not believe “what we’ve been doing” was working to engage and educate students in his school. He seemed aligned with the future-oriented position McDougall (2010) had identified.

But not all teachers are as enthusiastic as Jay, and U.S. school policies and practices do not always align with such future-oriented desires. While calls for “21st century learning” and “21st century literacy” often foreground the need for students...
to become functional and rhetorical users of digital tools and technologies, implementing such tools in classrooms requires teachers to “reconceptualize the teaching of literacy” (Hicks & Turner, 2012, p. 59) and “take on new roles as English teachers” (p. 64). Negotiating these “new roles” requires teachers to reimagine how they teach and, concurrently, who they are as teachers (Johnson, 2016). As teachers are reconceptualizing their teaching and self-identities as ELA teachers, they also must navigate institutional policies and social discourses that maintain more traditional views of what it means to teach reading and writing. Outside pressure from state standards and related exams, prescribed curricula, and deeply entrenched ideologies about what counts as reading and writing can pose conflict and challenges to teacher identity development (Howell et al., 2017; Johnson, 2016; Vetter et al., 2014). For example, some of the teachers in McDougall’s (2010) study struggled to negotiate their new responsibilities as teachers of visual and media literacy with more traditional expectations of “the basics” of reading, writing, and grammar. Johnson’s (2016) analysis similarly showed that even teachers who embrace a forward-looking vision of teaching digital writing must still negotiate school policies and cultures that hold contradictory understandings of what counts as writing, and, concurrently, what it means to be a writer.

In this article, I share results from IRB approved research with five secondary teachers (all names are pseudonyms) as they negotiated their development as teachers of digital writing in Texas public schools. These teachers, ranging from their first year to more than 15 years of experience at the start of the research, enrolled in a graduate level course I taught focused on the theory and practice of digital writing in ELA classrooms, and they each expressed interest in implementing a more effectively integrated curriculum in the year that followed. In the graduate course and this research, I follow the National Writing Project in describing digital writing as a shift “in the ecology of writing and communication and, indeed, what it means to write—to create and compose and share” (DeVoss et al., 2010, p. 4). In other words, to teach and practice digital writing is not simply to use new digital tools to achieve traditional goals and processes, but to imagine the full range of possibilities in a networked world.

In the analysis that follows, I use “identity” as an analytic tool to understand five teachers’ development as teachers of digital writing. Focusing on teacher identity is important because of the recursive connections between teacher identity development, how a teacher teaches, and opportunities for student learning (Alsup, 2019; Kanno and Stuart, 2011). Following similar research on teacher development and identity (Lee, 2013), this study examines teacher identity in relation to discourse (how teachers talk about themselves) and practice (how they perform their identities in their work), with attention to how identification is influenced by and through social and cultural factors. This article’s focus on teachers’ identity
development can provide readers with insights into how teachers think about digital literacies and technologies, what they do, and challenges they may face as they develop as teachers of digital writing. Implications will be particularly valuable for teacher educators responding to the growing use of digital tools in school settings.

**Theoretical Framework**

My understanding of identity follows several decades of scholarship that have sought distance from static, internal, unitary conceptions of identity in favor of view of identities as multiple, dynamic, and fragmented between and among social worlds (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Here I follow Gee (2000), who defines identity as being recognized as a certain “kind of person” in a given context; in other words, identity is about the performance of identity and the recognition (or not) of that identity performance. As Gee explains, a person performs their identities in ongoing combinations of speaking or writing, acting and interacting, gesturing, and believing or valuing that leave oneself “open to being recognized in a certain way” (p. 109). We implicitly construct and negotiate our identities, discursively and otherwise, in relation to the people we interact with and the communities we engage in.

**Teacher Identity and Pedagogy**

Scholars interested in teacher development have suggested that identity formation is an integral and necessary consideration for understanding how and why teachers teach the way that they do (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Danielewicz, 2001; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Reeves, 2009). Often traced to Wenger’s (1998) contention that all learning is identity work because learning entails becoming a “kind of person,” learning to teach has been theorized as an ongoing “process of becoming” a teacher (Britzman, 2003). From this perspective, learning to teach is not about gaining knowledge of specific content or even of any teaching method, per se; instead, learning to teach is about learning “how to be someone who teaches” (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 317; see also Danielewicz, 2001; Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

The construction of teacher identity can be understood as a social process, as teacher identity is situated within the social, institutional, cultural, and historical context of a teacher’s work (Lee, 2013; Søreide, 2006). As Danielewicz (2001) suggested, teacher identity includes “our understanding of who we are and of who we think other people are” and who other people think teachers are, as well (p. 10). Teachers identify in specific ways—as someone who cares about students, for example—both to align with other teachers who share their views and to differentiate themselves from teachers, other actors, and even policies that do not share their values (Danielewicz, 2001; Søreide, 2006). In this way, any reform
effort or pedagogical change requires identity work, as teachers reassess their sense of self as a teacher within broader contexts.

In the fields of English education and language teaching, more broadly, researchers have emphasized the interconnections of teacher identity development and pedagogy. As Alsup (2019) explains, identity affects pedagogy and vice versa, such that teacher identities and pedagogies coevolve over time. As developing teachers gain experience in the classroom and interact with students, they learn what is important to their teaching and solidify what they value, while at the same time their evolving identities influence how teachers interact with students and instantiate their practice (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Furthermore, teacher identities are always in dialogue with others and with external demands and social contexts, such that teachers must negotiate their own beliefs about writing (and themselves as teachers of writing) within “authoritative discourses” of standard language ideologies and what “counts” as writing and “good” writing in school districts and public discourse (Vetter et al., 2014; Weaver & Fowler-Amato, 2022). In their study of English teachers promoting a critical language awareness approach in the classroom, Weaver and Fowler-Amato (2022) point out that pedagogical interventions may exist in conflict with circulating ideologies, offering a challenge both to the pedagogy and to a developing teacher’s identity. The authors note how the teachers’ developing linguistic consciousness in their study was both supported and constrained by interlocutors, including by concerns they would receive pushback from administrators in a standardized testing-driven context. Vetter et al.’s (2014) study of a developing teacher’s identity work similarly located conflict as the teacher, Madison, attempted to negotiate her own “writing workshop identity within a [test-oriented] Writing Blitz world” (p. 24). These studies demonstrate that conflict and tension are the norm for developing teachers, and that English teacher identity work is always ongoing alongside pedagogical development.

**Identities-in-Discourse and Identities-in-Practice**

An understanding of identity as performative and multifaceted has led researchers to focus on the ways in which identities emerge in discourse and in practice. An identities-in-discourse lens recognizes the ways in which identities are discursively constituted, mainly through language (Lee, 2013; Trent, 2010; Varghese et al, 2005). For this study focusing on teacher identity work, it is important to recognize that teachers acquire new modes of discourse (i.e., professional language) and negotiate related beliefs and values about teaching and learning as they continually construct their identities. The discourses teachers use to describe themselves—and those used by others—are also factors in identity development (McDougall, 2010).

Identity can further be understood through an identities-in-practice approach that foregrounds concrete practices, tasks, and actions, offering a related
(though not distinct) set of data points to a discursive approach (Trent, 2010). As Lee (2013) explains, “identity formation and classroom practice are closely related because while practice helps foster and develop identities, the emerging identities in turn shape teachers’ changing classroom practice” (p. 332). Identity-in-practice can thus be understood in terms of both what a teacher says about themselves (narrated identity) and what is observed in their actual teaching practice (enacted identity). Because identities exist in a recursive relationship with instructional practices, studying identities-in-practice can be a valuable approach for understanding learning opportunities afforded to students (Cremin & Baker, 2014; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

**Research Design**

This research project uses “identity” as an analytic tool to understand teachers’ development as teachers of digital writing. In what follows, I examine teacher identity in relation to discourse (how teachers talk about themselves) and practice (how they perform their identities in their work). In particular, the research questions that guided the study were:

1. How do teachers discursively construct their identities as teachers of digital writing?
2. What factors influence teacher negotiation of identities in the process of becoming teachers of digital writing?

**Research Context**

The teachers in this study taught at public schools in and near El Paso, Texas, a binational metropolitan area on the U.S.-México border. Texas was one of the model states for accountability-focused school reform efforts in the No Child Left Behind era, and it is nearly impossible to discuss teaching in Texas without addressing the pressures on teachers caused by large-scale, standardized assessments. As I will elaborate below, the teachers in the study struggled to negotiate their desire to present engaging, active learning activities for their students while administrators and colleagues promoted curricula directly related to state exams.

As of the most recent revision to the state education standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for English Language Arts and Reading continue to prioritize the same linear, alphabetic modes of reading, writing, and analysis that have characterized English studies classrooms for decades. The middle and high school standards each include only one sub-standard with explicit mention of multimodality and/or digital texts. For example, standard 7.F of the high school ELA standards—using the same language as 8.F of the middle school standards—states that students should be able to “analyze characteristics of multimodal and digital texts” (TEA, 2020). It is important to note the emphasis on
analysis in the one standard that explicitly acknowledges expanding literacies. While there are composition-focused standards that may be applied to digital writing (“the student uses genre characteristics and craft to compose multiple texts”) and there is mention of “digital resources” for research purposes, there is no concrete integration of multimodal and/or digital writing in the composition standards. As such, the standards do not recognize the necessary shift from consumption (reading) to production (making) often advocated for ELA education (Kress, 1999; New London Group, 1996).

**Entering the Study**

This study began when the teacher participants enrolled in a graduate course on digital literacies and pedagogies in spring 2022. I designed and taught the course with a focus on building a theoretical understanding of multiliteracies, experiencing a range of pedagogical possibilities for using digital tools and technologies, and developing participant identities as teachers of digital writing and as digital writers, themselves. Teacher participants in the course read a range of research articles focusing on multiliteracies and secondary and postsecondary teaching and learning, with Turner and Hicks’s (2017) *Argument in the Real World* serving as a guide for the course: one week we focused on video, one week on webtexts, and so on. I foregrounded digital writing in the course to emphasize creation, production, and the many modes of meaning-making available to writers in the digital age. I have previously argued (with prior course participants) for the benefits of a course design that features opportunities for experimentation and practice to help teachers expand their understandings of writing and literacies and grow their confidence using digital tools (Jacobson et al., 2021). To this end, the course included a class blog in addition to tasks and activities encouraging the creation of audio, photo, and video texts. I also incorporated digital tools in every class session, using Pear Deck for interactive slides, Google Jamboard for online mapping, and shared Word documents for collaborative notetaking, among other activities that demonstrated the integration of digital writing into an English education classroom.

In addition to the blog posts and interactive class activities, teacher participants were required to complete two out of class tasks related to a question or topic of interest in digital writing and pedagogies. First, they interviewed a student in their secondary classroom about their experiences as a digital writer, posting audio excerpts of the interview and a reflection to their blog. Then, based on their findings in the interview, readings in the course, and their own understanding of their students and classroom objectives, each teacher participant designed a pedagogical intervention using digital tools and wrote a report about their experience. These final projects became one data source for this research project.
At the time of the digital literacies graduate course, the influence of covid-19 was still prevalent in schools, not only with (optional) mask wearing and antigen tests available in the nurse’s office, but through the use of district-purchased digital devices and tools. In a survey at the beginning of the course, all the participating teachers reported using some digital tools in their teaching, but they described wanting to learn how to integrate digital technology in more beneficial ways for themselves and their students. For example, Sofia wrote, “I want to implement not just assignments digitally but make them in a way that they feel organic and not just like I am meeting a requirement to use tools online.”

Teacher Participants

The five teachers in this study taught in secondary schools in and around El Paso, Texas at the time of this study. Camila, Gustavo, and Jay taught in rural high schools outside the city limits, while Sofia and Tracey taught at an urban middle school located within a few miles of a U.S.-México border crossing. While four of the five teachers were teaching for five years or less at the beginning of the study, their levels of experience ranged from Tracey, who was in her second month of teaching at the start of our course together, to Gustavo, in his 17th year. All of the teachers self-identified as Latina/o or Hispanic on demographic surveys.

Camila

During the first year of the study, Camila taught ninth grade at a rural high school outside the city limits. Camila, in her third year of teaching when she enrolled in the digital literacies class, was already an active digital writer on social media, and reported using TikTok and Instagram regularly. She told me she used social media for both personal and professional purposes: she read teacher blogs, followed teacher accounts on TikTok, and subscribed to podcasts that helped her generate ideas to use in her classroom, particularly for teaching English language learners.

Gustavo

Gustavo was in his 17th year of teaching when he decided to return to graduate school to freshen his practice. He taught mostly ninth grade students at a rural high school about a 30-minute drive from the city. Gustavo described himself as “old school” in our first interview, and said he was not a social media user or digital writer. But Gustavo was not afraid of technology and enjoyed teaching himself to use certain tools for both personal and professional use. At one point, he taught himself Photoshop and did some image editing for a local business.
Jay

Jay was in his fifth year as an ELA teacher at a rural high school when he enrolled in the digital literacies class. Jay did not self-identify as a “digital writer” at the beginning of the study, but he was an active social media user. Jay told me he used Facebook and Snapchat for his family and personal social life, and he used Twitter (now X) as an extension of his teaching practice, connecting with students and offering them a glimpse into his life outside of school.

Sofia

Even though she was a first-year teacher at the beginning of this study, Sofia told me she felt more experienced because of years working as a tutor and teacher assistant as an undergraduate student. When she enrolled in the digital literacies course, Sofia was teaching a middle school language acquisition course for newcomer students at an urban school near the border. Sofia’s self-reported digital writing mostly consisted of journal or diary entries that she composed on the computer. Even though she had TikTok and Twitter accounts, she told me she did not want to post publicly because she was intimidated by potential audience reaction. In addition to following social media, Sofia was an avid podcast listener.

Tracey

Tracey was hired as a middle school teacher mid-term and entered the digital literacies graduate course with only two months of experience as a classroom teacher. She taught at the same urban school as Sofia. At the time of our first interview, Tracey had just completed her first year as an ELA teacher, but she had applied to teach social studies, her passion, for the upcoming school year. Even though she did not self-identify as a digital writer, Tracey was an active Instagram user, often posting pictures from her daily life with emoji-filled captions.

Data Collection

With my focus on discourse and teacher identity development, the primary data for this study were transcripts from semi-structured interviews with the teacher participants. Each participant completed two interviews: one in the summer of 2022 following the graduate course, and the second occurring in 2023 after at least one semester of classroom implementation. Interviews were held in my office on campus, at local coffee shops, or over Zoom, and ranged from 25 to 45 minutes for a total of 329 interview minutes.

Other data were used to offer depth and complexity to my analysis and provide insight into identities-in-practice. A questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the digital literacies graduate course to assess participants’ understanding of digital writing and experience teaching with digital technologies prior to the graduate course. Changing conceptions of digital writing and
implications for pedagogy were captured in the classroom research project completed for the graduate course and in representative classroom materials the teachers created and implemented the following semester. These materials became discussion points in the second interview.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I implemented a recursive approach to reading the data, with a first reading to gain a general understanding of the data followed by more targeted reading to identify themes and categories about teachers’ identity construction and development (Saldaña, 2016). Emergent categories were coded for: 1) how the teacher participants talked about and conceptualized digital writing; 2) how they talked about teaching digital writing after the digital writing course; 3) how they saw themselves as teachers of digital writing; and, because identity development is a social process, I also focused on 4) external factors that mediated the self-construction of identity, like state and local policy and administrator and colleague reactions to their work.

**Limitations**

As a university professor I held a position of authority in relation to the teacher participants, which I acknowledge to be a potential limitation of the study. This was a particular concern for my research relationships with Gustavo, Jay, Sofia, and Tracey, who were enrolled in the MAT program in which I am faculty and may have thus been inclined to offer “a socially or professionally preferred response” to questions about their teaching (Wiersma, 1991, p. 194). In an effort to limit this effect, I did not introduce the study until the end of our course together and did not conduct the first interview until after final grades were submitted; the second interview was conducted during a semester when I was not teaching graduate courses. It is also possible to view my relationship with the participants as a benefit to the study. I had known Jay, Sofia, and Tracey for at least two years prior to beginning the study, so our familiarity may have led to more in-depth discussion. For example, in our second interview, Sofia referenced a digital project she had composed in an undergraduate course she had taken with me in 2020. A strong rapport could have also encouraged these teachers to share more of their personal histories, beliefs, and struggles than they may have otherwise.

**Findings**

The first set of findings address the teacher participants’ ongoing development as teachers of digital writing. Their reasons for integrating digital writing illuminate how their values and beliefs interact with their ongoing understanding of digital writing and digital writing pedagogies, and of themselves as teachers as digital writers. The second set of findings focus on identities-in-
practice and some of the tensions and challenges that emerged when attempting to enact desired teaching practices.

Discourses of Digital Writing

The five teacher participants in this study each expressed excitement about possibilities of expanding their teaching practice, largely through discourses of student engagement and motivation. In fact, each of them wrote about engagement in their final projects for the graduate course, and all had at least one coded excerpt of interview transcripts discussing student engagement or motivation. The teacher participants also noted a shift in their own thinking toward “integration” rather than treating digital writing as an add-on to the traditional curriculum.

Student Engagement

The teacher participants in this study came to see digital writing as an opportunity to build student engagement and investment in their classrooms. For example, Jay told me that integrating digital writing in his courses was about “trying to make sure that [students are] engaged and it’s something they want to do.” Jay explained how digital writing fit his broader teaching philosophy, saying, “I always think of the student first. Student engagement is number one for me.” Jay told me he found value in digital assignments because students enjoyed them while they were practicing rhetorical strategies. He said, “Little do they realize that they’re growing. Their intellect is growing, they’re gaining awareness, they’re becoming more aware of what they’re using and for a purpose.”

Sofia similarly noticed a shift in student engagement when she introduced digital writing tasks. She told me the “excitement of the kids” motivated her as a teacher, and she noted the ways digital writing projects changed the tenor of the class community, saying in her first interview that the students “just have so much fun and they help one another.”

Gustavo and Tracey saw digital writing as a way to create more accessible class lessons. In his second interview, Gustavo told me about class activities in which students could “insert pictures, some GIFs, videos, that includes everybody. If you like to draw, you can just upload your drawing.” When Gustavo states that the variety of potential submissions “includes everybody,” he seems to be recognizing students’ multiple literacies, interests, and abilities. Tracey similarly valued digital writing because it “appealed more to [her students’] style of learning.” She noted that incorporating videos and Pear Deck, an interactive slide deck program, was helpful “to make the content more relevant to them.” For Tracey, incorporating digital writing was one way she adapted the curriculum to align with her self-identity as a teacher who meets students where they are.
Then and Now: Toward “Integration”

Like the teachers in Johnson’s (2016) study, participants in this research often used language like “before this class” to discuss the ways their approach to digital writing had changed based on their work in the graduate course. For example, Camila discussed her growing understanding of digital writing and of herself as a digital writer:

Before this class, I never really looked at it like that [as digital writing]. Now, I definitely do… I never approached it in the sense as I’m a writer or I’m creating a message. I—maybe sometimes, if it was intentional. And I feel now, I look at it more intentionally for everything. I guess even just things I post online and being like, “Okay, what am I saying? What does this mean?” Whereas before, it might have been just kind of mindless posting.

In this excerpt we see Camila’s growing attention to her social media use as inherently rhetorical with an embedded message and audience, as well as her self-identification as a digital writer, an identity position she says she would not have claimed previously.

Tracey, another active social media user, similarly recognized a change in her conception of what counts as writing. She said, “Before taking the class, I only really understood writing as writing on a doc, like the Word documents. I didn’t really understand what digital writing was or the use of the hyperlinks and all of that…. I only post pictures, but I guess that’s a literacy in its own way.” Here Tracey narrates her own development, saying that she “didn’t really understand” digital writing before the class and recognizing that her own social media use, even “only” posting pictures, is “a literacy in its own way.” This expanding notion of what counts as writing pushes her perception of writing beyond “writing on a doc,” a framework that would influence her pedagogical choices.

The participants described their teaching practices in similar chronological terms. Sofia reflected on graduate class discussions about what it means to utilize digital tools in class lessons effectively, saying, “Using your board that is digital doesn’t mean that you’re incorporating digital tools in entirety.” She continued, “I feel like in my first year, I really fell into that just because I didn’t know what to do. I would use my board as a projector with slides and it wasn’t very interactive.” Tracey similarly discussed a surface-level use of digital tools: “Before…it was very limited because I had no idea what I was doing at all. I was printing things. The only time they would use the computers to get on Google Class and it was really just like an assignment of slides, like ‘read the slides and do them.’” These statements from Sofia and Tracey show how their developing understanding of digital writing pedagogies influenced what they valued in their teaching practices.

Based on the graduate course experience, the teacher participants in this study, like Sofia and Tracey, began to see digital writing as something that should
be integrated into class curriculum and involve students in activities that go beyond word processing or developing a slide deck presentation. Words like “incorporate” and “interactive” pepper the interview transcripts, like when Sofia talked about wanting to “incorporate more of a digital base where it could be more of a creativity-led or -centered teaching style.” In this excerpt, Sofia was reflecting on a shift she made from presenting slides and having students answer questions to creating a more “interactive” classroom. Discussing an activity in which she had her students create and explain a music playlist using shared Google Slides, Sofia said, “That’s what I want to incorporate more of, those assignments that are more digital and not just me changing slides on the board and presenting.” For Sofia, the use of tools like PowerPoint, was not the same as “incorporating” digital writing, a discourse echoed by others in the study.

Gustavo’s ongoing development as a teacher of digital writing appeared through his frustration with school policies that required students to use their computers for activities that did not take full advantage of networked affordances. In his first interview, he discussed a shift that occurred when his school district first supplied laptop computers for all students:

A few years ago when they first brought the computers, the principal came in and then he saw my kids have some [printed] copies and he’s like, “You don’t think you could have put that on there [the computer]?” I’m like, “Why?” Just so I could say I used it? Just taking something that’s on paper, putting it up here, I’m not—what am I really doing? All I did was, “okay, we put it on the computer.” Just a really expensive copy, you know, but what is actually happening?

Here Gustavo seems frustrated by a technology approach that uses the computer as “a really expensive copy” rather than realizing the potentials of digital writing. Expanding on this theme in his second interview, Gustavo said, “The computer should be a tool to be something different,” and should be used to for “something that you cannot do on paper, something that you cannot do on a poster board.” Tracey similarly talked about wanting “to utilize the computer in different ways” during her first interview. As she looked forward to her second year as a teacher, Tracey said she wanted students “to be able to create something,” echoing scholarship calling for a shift from analysis to production as the telos of English Language Arts (Ito et al., 2013; Kress, 1999).

**Self-Identifying as a Leader**

Even though the teacher participants in this study were mostly early in their careers, they recognized that their growing expertise in digital writing pedagogies could position them as leaders both locally in their schools and in the broader field of ELA education. To be clear, some of these teachers had already taken leadership
roles prior to our graduate course together, but the focus on digital writing seemed to generate a sense of possibility and identification as a leader in this specific area of work.

In our first interview, Jay told me he had been pushing for more integration of digital tools among his school colleagues even prior to our graduate course. He told me he had tried years before to introduce his colleagues to Google Classroom but did not find much interest. Then, when all teachers were forced to use the platform during covid-19 remote teaching, Jay became a valued asset. Jay told me he sees digital writing as another opportunity to lead his colleagues and his school into new possibilities, telling me, “That’s my mentality. I want to be one of the voices that says, ‘I was one of the first to help create that change and reform in education.’”

Gustavo and Tracey both talked about wanting to share what they had learned with their colleagues. Gustavo told me about a teaching expo the district held each year, in which teachers submit proposals to host workshops on a topic of their choosing. Gustavo had presented previously, and he imagined a session on digital writing possibilities might be an opportunity for “more buy-in” among his colleagues. Unfortunately, at the time of our second interview in winter 2023, there had not been a teaching expo since the pandemic began.

Like Gustavo, Tracey imagined herself as someone who could introduce new practices to her colleagues. In our second interview, she expressed frustration with the ways technology and digital tools were introduced at her school and proposed teacher-led workshops as a potential solution. Tracey explained to me that while professional development meetings existed to introduce district-purchased tools to teachers, “there’s not really someone who introduces technology to everyone and shows them how to use it.” Recognizing that “everybody uses it so differently,” Tracey thought it would be beneficial to give teachers an opportunity to share their uses with their colleagues in a more formal setting. She explained, “I could have showed all the other teachers how I used Pear Deck. I would explain it to the people in my department, but they were like, ‘Oh,’ you know? It’s not as formal.” Tracey told me she felt like her ideas weren’t always taken seriously in department meetings because she was considered the “new” or “young” teacher, and she seemed to want a forum to share her developing knowledge and pedagogical strategies in a more “formal,” authoritative context.

**Barriers to Fully Realized Identities and Pedagogies**

The teacher participants in this study named several tensions arising from policy and institutional ideologies that hindered their ability to realize their desired identities and related pedagogical goals. Many of these factors were related to pressure to raise student scores on state exams, even if indirectly. For example, the teachers spoke about time as a challenge because of curricular requirements...
imposed by school administrations related to a perceived need to raise test scores. As a result, Camila, Jay, and Gustavo planned their graduate course project implementation to take place when they had more control of their instructional time after testing was over, and their students struggled to complete their digital projects before the end of the school year. Some of the teacher participants also felt constrained by the digital tools the school districts had purchased that became administrative mandates.

**External Mandates: Required Curricula and Digital Tools**

When I met with the teacher participants for the second interview a full semester after our digital literacies course, all expressed some regret about their implementation (or lack thereof) of digital writing in their respective classrooms. In a statement that echoed other participants, Jay told me that “things have been piled on me with district initiatives.” In his case, the district had created a series of social-emotional learning activities as well as a new initiative to create a student-written literary anthology, for which all ELA teachers were required to teach the same prompt. While Jay believed in promoting student voices, he found this initiative and the universal prompt to be constraining, taking away from time he could have used to initiate what would, in his mind, be more engaging and beneficial projects.

Gustavo also faced curricular challenges in his rural school district. In addition to distributing a laptop computer for each student, the administration had purchased a new curriculum all teachers in all subjects were required to use. As Gustavo told me:

> It’s an online textbook and it has questions, text, and all. But they’re really pushing where they want people following it word by word, and that’s been a big challenge because it’s—That’s the crazy thing. The only questions I can ask are questions that were in that book, you know? That’s really tying me down, and I can’t really do what I need to do. That’s kind of where I’m at.

Here we see Gustavo’s frustration at his inability to enact his own agency in the classroom in the face of district mandates. The metaphor he invokes (“really tying me down”) is powerful for describing the ways external forces impinge on his self-identity as an effective teacher who works to meet his students’ needs.

Like Gustavo, Sofia felt constrained by a district initiative. In her second year as a teacher, she was assigned to a challenging classroom situation teaching students who had previously failed the state exam. Sofia believed she could create engaging lessons that would motivate students, but learned she was mandated to use a district-purchased online tutoring program for a certain number of hours each week. As Sofia told me, “Because the district pays for them, we do have to use
them. I’ve always battled with that.” Here Sofia seems to enter into an antagonistic relationship with the program and, by proxy, her administration. In our conversation, it became clear that this mandated program had dampened Sofia’s spirit, removing some of the joy she usually felt in teaching. She said:

I feel like it takes away some of your drive or your creativity. Because last year I wouldn’t use this program, and I felt like I had more ideas or what I wanted to do, or what I could do, or activities that I just came up with on the spot. Right now I’m just like, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what else I can do. I feel like that’s very limiting. Even as a teacher I’m like, I can’t come up with anything else because we have to use it... ... I feel like that’s also what has me so down, out of ideas. Because I’m like, I have to adapt myself to the program, not necessarily adapt the program to who I am as a teacher.

In this excerpt, Sofia demonstrates how external pressures or mandates are interconnected with teacher identities. We see Sofia attempting to negotiate her desired identity as an innovative, “creativity-centered” teacher in the face of external mandates that “take away some of your drive or your creativity.” When she says that “as a teacher” she “can’t come up with anything else because we have to use it,” Sofia seems to be pointing to a crisis of identity: To her, a teacher is someone who “comes up with” lessons and ideas, but this mandated tool constrained this integral aspect of her identity. She had to “adapt [herself] to the program” in ways that have diminished her own sense of agency.

**Technology Limitations**

Some of the teacher participants faced other limitations caused by school or district policies that blocked or throttled student access to digital networks. Gustavo implemented a digital reading response project for a class reading of *Romeo and Juliet* in which students would create a visual interpretation of a scene as a way to engage in multimodal meaning making. When the students searched Google Images for pictures of “sad” or “depressed” teenagers they wanted to use to depict Romeo, they were blocked from the internet due to monitoring software that attempts to identify student mental health issues. Gustavo told me the project “backfired,” and he had to meet with school guidance counselors and technology support to discuss a plan for similar projects in the future.

Sofia wanted her students to be able to compose and post on a social network like Twitter or TikTok but found that a school internet firewall blocked all social media. While Camila’s students had eluded a firewall by using their cellphone data rather than a wireless connection to read and post on TikTok, many of Sofia’s students crossed the U.S.-México border daily to attend school and did not have U.S. data plans on their cellphones; the students needed to connect to wifi.
to use apps, but “since the [school] internet blocks the pages, they can’t do it.” In addition to blocked websites, Sofia found that the district-provided computers and the wireless internet services were often not fast enough to keep up even with some of the district-supplied programs.

**Resistance From Colleagues and Administrators**

The teacher participants’ developing identities as teachers of digital writing needed to be negotiated within school cultures often at odds with their teaching goals. In particular, the teachers faced resistance from colleagues and administrators who made them feel hesitant or even rebellious for wanting to incorporate digital writing. Sometimes this tension emerged through required curricula or activities, as described above, but in other cases the resistance was more subtle or interpersonal. As Jay said, “People are very stuck in their ways and they just do not want to adapt and change and I don’t understand why.” The distance Jay seemed to feel from his colleagues who “just do not want to adapt and change” was shared by many of the teachers in the study.

The challenge of navigating school culture was perhaps most pronounced in Tracey’s experience. During our first interview, Tracey expressed excitement to begin her second year of teaching. While she had her share of struggles in her first year, as all teachers do, she had made some important progress in developing a practice that aligned with her self-identity as a teacher who engages students in innovative learning activities. As she contemplated moving from ELA to social studies, a subject she had initially wanted to teach, Tracey told me she thought incorporating digital writing would be particularly valuable. While students tended to think history was all about memorizing dates, names, and places, Tracey wanted students to “interact with the information” using digital tools. Tracey did bring this interactive approach to the next semester. In our second interview, she told me about asking students to engage in a mock direct message conversation with King George about why the colonies would be leaving England. She told me she taught the Declaration of Independence like a “breakup letter,” so the students would be messaging the king to reinforce “reasons why we’re breaking up with him.” She explained potential benefits of this approach for her students, saying, “I was trying to do things like that because what I noticed is that in social studies, the terms are so complicated that they just don’t remember. Using the Instagram posts and things like that, it helps them remember it more.” In this case, Tracey attempted to engage her students by allowing them to draw from their prior knowledge of digital writing, even if the task itself was not conducted through the Instagram platform.

Tracey described her approach as distinct from the other teachers in her department, who often used model exam excerpts and questions in their lessons. Tracey told me her colleagues “would give [students] a passage about whatever they were doing, and then they would give them questions and they would have
them take notes.” Tracey initially tried to follow the lead of more experienced teachers in her department, but quickly found that the students were “not going to learn this way.” When Tracey did start to implement other types of activities, she felt resistance from her colleagues, especially after a mid-semester benchmark test when Tracey’s students were scoring higher than those of her colleagues. Tracey explained:

When we got the test scores, they didn’t understand why mine were higher and theirs weren’t as high and they were just like, “It’s because you have all the smart kids.” That’s what they would tell me. Like, “You have all the smart kids, so it’s easier for you.” I think one teacher would always make the excuse, like, “I have a kid with an ankle monitor.” But so did I! I was like, “[This student] does everything. It’s not an excuse.” She’s like, “The population of kids that I have are tough.” But she wasn’t trying to change her curriculum to adapt to them. You can’t just give them two-page passages and expect them to know everything about the American Revolution.

Here Tracey expresses clear frustration as her more experienced colleagues diminish her accomplishments (“You have all the smart kids”). In the final sentence of the excerpt, Tracey creates distance from her colleagues when she says, “You can’t just give them two-page passages and expect them to know everything about the American Revolution,” revealing a clear contradiction between what she sees as the more traditional approach and her own teaching.

In the interest of space, allow me to say that many of the teacher participants described similar experiences and tension with colleagues and administrators. When Camila decided to have her students create a TikTok video for their final project, she felt resistance from her colleagues and decided to remove her class from a department-wide presentation. Jay talked about the “kind ignorance” he received from his colleagues and administration when he tried to share his digital writing strategies: “‘Oh, that’s great. Good job. Yeah, awesome.’ Then they walk out of my room.” These experiences challenged the teachers’ developing sense of self as teachers of digital writing.

Discussion and Implications

This study illustrates the importance of identity work, and the challenges therein, as five secondary ELA teachers developed digital writing pedagogies. An examination of the teacher participants’ identities-in-discourse, the ways they talked about themselves as teachers of digital writing, demonstrated their enthusiasm for integrating digital writing as a growing aspect of their professional identities. As the “before this class” discourse demonstrates, the graduate course they experienced seemed to be a mediating factor in the participants’ developing identities as teachers of digital writing (Lee, 2013). They began to see themselves
as digital writers or, at the very least, as rhetorical users of digital writing technologies like social media. Reflecting course readings and activities, the teacher participants also began to see digital writing as an integral aspect of an ELA education, no longer an add-on or something fun to do separate from the serious work of school. Their stated desire for digital writing to be “integrated” or “incorporated” into a student-centered curriculum further reflected a discursive construction of identity in growing alignment with some of the leading teacher-scholars in the field (Hicks & Turner, 2013; Howell et al., 2017; Mirra, 2019; Mirra & Garcia, 2021). The teacher participants also expressed recognition that their growing expertise in digital writing pedagogies could position them as leaders amongst their colleagues. Like Jay in the epigraph of this article, they seemed to agree that digital writing was a “new avenue” worth following. The ways in which these teachers discussed their evolving roles as teachers and their desires to further pursue these pedagogies seemed to indicate developing identities as teachers of digital writing.

At the same time, the tensions and challenges experienced as the teacher participants attempted to enact these identities in practice serve as a reminder that "identity development does not occur in a void but is situated within the social, institutional, and historical context of teachers' work" (Lee, 2013, p. 342). Participant identities and desired practices were frustrated at times by mandated curricula and digital tools that limited teacher agency, with Gustavo saying that a district-mandated curriculum was “tying me down” and Sofia expressing similar frustration about the constraints she felt teaching a course with a mandated digital tutoring component. In some cases, school district firewalls and wireless capacity limited the possibilities of what teachers and their students could achieve in the classroom. Tracey, Camila, and Jay also felt tension with more “traditional” teachers and administrators who seemed to minimize their use of digital tools and technologies, or, in Jay’s case, elicited a “kind ignorance” when presented with potentially innovative approaches. Reflecting the broader tension facing ELA teachers to teach both traditional and new literacies (McDougall, 2010), the participating teachers described external pressure from colleagues and administrators related to state-mandated standardized exams and tension with those who did not share their views of the value of digital writing.

Overall, findings demonstrate that more traditional discourses of reading and writing remain powerful in and out of school, and exist in tension with a desired, integrated, student-centered digital writing pedagogy in these teachers’ school contexts. The narrow conception of what counts as reading and writing and teaching and learning among their colleagues seems to have left the participants in this research somewhat isolated among the faculty at their respective schools: They were consistently aligning themselves against more “traditional” teachers but did
not seem to feel they had many colleagues with whom they could share their perspectives and practices.

It is important to note that these barriers to identification can have real consequences for developing teachers. For Tracey, the isolation she felt as a new, young teacher was one factor in deciding to leave the profession after completing only a little more than one year at her school. While her commitment to digital writing was not the sole factor in her decision, the lack of support and the distance she felt from her colleagues as she sought to integrate innovative lessons was an obstacle. Tracey described both interpersonal and pedagogical tension in her small department amongst the colleagues who told Tracey her class was successful “because you have all the smart kids.” Tracey explained, “Since everybody was doing different things, I think it started to break the department apart because there was only three of us.”

Teacher educators cannot solve interpersonal tensions or school or department-level politics, but the results of this study do point to potential implications for those of us who work with pre- and in-service teachers. First and foremost, the findings in this study offer further evidence to support calls for teacher education, professional development, and other formal and informal professional learning communities that foreground identity work and the formation of supportive teacher communities (Alsup, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Lee, 2013; Raskauskas et al., 2023; Vetter et al., 2014). As traditional beliefs about writing continue to be challenged with the implementation of networked digital writing technologies, teachers need space to reflect upon their shifting roles and responsibilities and who they want to be as teachers in a changing world. The teacher participants in this study benefited from the opportunity to practice and theorize their digital writing pedagogies in the graduate course setting with the support of each other and me, their professor, as they negotiated their developing identities and pedagogies. Some of the activities we practiced in the class—like blogs, Pear Deck, collaborative Google Slides—made their way into the teachers’ classrooms, and they were able to share successes and challenges throughout our semester together. In her work with preservice teachers, Danielewicz (2001) writes that, regardless of their personal values, they “instinctively desired some other outside organizational, institutional recognition of their status as teachers” (p. 126). This kind of recognition, important for building “more secure, tougher” identities “less subject to doubt or disintegration,” took place in the graduate course, which served as a space where one evening each week the teacher participants supported each other. I am left to wonder if Tracey may have felt less frustration and isolation if her departmental tension occurred when she was enrolled in the graduate class with the other teachers in this study.

Tracey’s story makes clear the need for ongoing support within formal and informal community spaces. In fact, this research project seemed to offer one such
opportunity for support and extended reflection to some of the participants. As the teacher participants discussed in interviews how their teaching practice aligned (or not) with their desires, they were presented with an opportunity for self-conscious reflection, an important component of teacher identity development (Danielewicz, 2001). For example, when I met with Gustavo in January of 2023 for our second interview, he told me he had not implemented any digital writing because “the reality is, when I get back to work [after the course], it’s a little bit different because they want me to do things in a way.” But as our conversation continued and Gustavo talked about the value of digital writing to engage students, he said, “Now I think about it, I am going to throw it in. I have to. I can’t wait until the end. I’ve got to find a way to throw it in.” Here Gustavo acknowledges the ways he and other teachers often “wait until the end,” after state testing, to incorporate desired activities. While his phrasing of “throw it in” does not seem to reflect the integrated digital writing approach discussed in the course, his convincing discourse choice elsewhere in the sentence (“I’ve got to find a way”) appears to indicate the intensity of his values. A few weeks later, Gustavo sent me links to a task he created where students could offer digital responses to a statement or a prompt using Padlet, an online visual board-making tool that we used for brainstorming and collaborative discussion in the graduate course. “The students really enjoyed using Padlet,” he wrote to me, “and that led to some good discussions.” This example of Gustavo returning to digital writing after reflective discussion demonstrates the value of intentionally returning to prior ideas and experiences and a supportive teaching community that shares common values.

Similar opportunities for applied learning and reflexivity could be achieved through teacher-led research projects in professional learning communities or other formal or informal spaces. Trent (2010) suggests that teacher research in their own classrooms with the goal of pedagogical improvement can both clarify teachers’ desires to effect change in the teaching profession and foster acceptance of ambiguity, with an added potential benefit of softening perceived divisions among new and more “traditional” teachers. Given the tensions that exist between public discourses of literacy as reading and writing and more nuanced, multiliteracies approaches (Johnson, 2016; McDougall, 2010), and the conflicts many of the teachers in this study experienced with more experienced teachers, fostering intergenerational understanding and communication among teachers is essential for developing and maintaining sustainable, productive, and equitable teaching and learning environments.

The concerns of this study—and these teachers—will persist as communication technologies continue to evolve. For example, ChatGPT and other generative artificial intelligence tools not yet publicly available at the time of most interviews for this study have already engendered important thinking about the ways writing can and will change for future generations of writers (Beck & Levine,
2023; Shoffner, 2023), necessitating further reconsideration of what it means to be a teacher of writing. Efforts to constrain teacher agency through content restrictions also continue apace, especially in states with conservative activist legislatures, like Texas. Early and mid-career teachers must continue to negotiate their desired identities and practices amidst technological, political, and social pressures. Helping teachers to develop resilient and reflective professional identities in the context of ongoing technological change and sociopolitical tension is an urgent need for writing teacher educators across pedagogical levels.

References
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