

# *Reading Horizons*

---

*Volume 56, Issue 3*

2017

*Article 2*

SUMMER 2017

---

## “This I Believe” About the Teaching of Writing: Secondary Teachers’ Digital Essays About Their Pedagogical Understandings

Denise N. Morgan\*

Natasha H. Chenowith<sup>†</sup>

\*Kent State University - Kent Campus, dmorgan2@kent.edu

<sup>†</sup>Kent State University, nschonbe@kent.edu

Copyright ©2017 by the authors. *Reading Horizons* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). [http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)

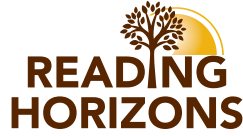
# “This I Believe” About the Teaching of Writing: Secondary Teachers’ Digital Essays About Their Pedagogical Understandings

Denise N. Morgan and Natasha H. Chenowith

## Abstract

This case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) examines the final projects of two secondary teachers in a graduate course about writing pedagogy. Teachers created digital essays along the lines of the National Public Radio’s “This I Believe” essays, which articulated their beliefs about the teaching of writing. We posed two research questions: a) What pedagogical understandings do teachers identify as their beliefs about writing and how do they represent those ideas in a digital composition? b) What did teachers learn from participating in the process of composing a digital essay? We found that teachers “reimagined” the teaching of writing, were personally drawn to the assignments in ways that surprised them, and realized the power of digital tools to accomplish what words simply cannot fully capture.

**KEYWORDS:** writing, digital tools, teacher education



## **“This I Believe” About the Teaching of Writing: Secondary Teachers’ Digital Essays About Their Pedagogical Understandings**

Denise N. Morgan  
*Kent State University*

Natasha H. Chenowith  
*Kent State University*

---

### **Abstract**

---

This case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) examines the final projects of two secondary teachers in a graduate course about writing pedagogy. Teachers created digital essays along the lines of the National Public Radio’s “This I Believe” essays, which articulated their beliefs about the teaching of writing. We posed two research questions: a) What pedagogical understandings do teachers identify as their beliefs about writing and how do they represent those ideas in a digital composition? b) What did teachers learn from participating in the process of composing a digital essay? We found that teachers “reimagined” the teaching of writing, were personally drawn to the assignments in ways that surprised them, and realized the power of digital tools to accomplish what words simply cannot fully capture.

---

**KEYWORDS:** writing, digital tools, teacher education

I sort of can’t believe that I am writing this, but...if we had all turned in essays instead of videos, the richness of the learning, experiences, and personalities in the room on Tuesday would have suffered. I can’t ignore that, and I won’t forget it going forward.

Tim, 2014

Tim (all names are pseudonyms) made the above statement after viewing his classmates’ digital essays at the end of the semester. Initially not excited about the assignment, he came to understand the opportunities afforded within these digital means. Tim said:

This was an interesting experience...I wasn’t thrilled about being required to use an unfamiliar technology in such a major assignment. Once I got over that, I committed to learning the technology. It wasn’t easy, but I started really basic...then progressively making more complex and layered videos with dialogue and music. This progression, as I taught myself the technology, can be seen in my digital explorations.

Tim's resistance to this assignment is not unlike that of other teachers who perceive technology to be useful but not essential to the teaching of writing (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011; Pytash, Testa, & Nigh, 2015). However, what it means to write has changed within the complexities of a 21st century world; writing instruction needs to be reimagined in this digital age (Hicks, Turner, & Stratton, 2013; National Writing Project with DeVoss, Eidman-Adahl, & Hicks, 2010).

For students to take full advantage of new writing opportunities, their teachers need to be experienced and comfortable with both the technical and compositional aspects of digital and multimodal writing. Grabill and Hicks (2005) argued, "English teachers (and teacher educators) should no longer have a conversation about literacy without considering technology" (p. 306). Teachers' understandings of the integration and use of technology for the purposes of teaching writing are central to how they help students learn to access, evaluate, synthesize, and contribute new information in a multimodal society (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009). What is problematic is that, despite the changing landscape of what constitutes "writing," few teachers enter the classroom with meaningful digital composition experiences (Hicks, Turner, & Stratton, 2013).

Research illustrates the centrality of new literacies in English/language arts teaching and learning (Albers, 2011; Alvermann, 2008; Doering, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007; Hull, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Defining digital writing is difficult due to the evolving nature of new tools available, so it is often discussed in terms of the "... affordances offered by new digital tools that make new products and practices possible" (National Writing Project with DeVoss, Eidman-Adahl, & Hicks, 2010). With evolving understandings of what constitutes writing, researchers are examining the preparation of teachers for teaching digital and multimodal composition (see Ferdig & Pytash, 2014). Preservice teachers' experiences with creating public service announcements (Albers, 2014), memoirs (Werderich & Manderino, 2013), metanarratives of writing assignments (Hundley & Holbrook, 2013), multimodal compositions (Rish, 2013), and digital portfolios (Hicks, Russo, Autrey, Gardner, Kabodian, & Edington, 2007) have been explored with researchers noting the tension teachers experience as their former conceptions of writing are examined in light of the new technologies available for writing.

Our study aims to explore those tensions by investigating the experiences of two teachers crafting digital essays. We posed two research questions: a) What pedagogical understandings do teachers identify as their beliefs about writing, and how do they represent those ideas in a digital composition? and b) What did teachers learn from the process of composing a digital essay? As a teacher educator and future teacher educator studying the teaching of writing, we were intrigued by the intersection of how teachers articulate their pedagogical beliefs about writing while they simultaneously explore the affordances and limitations technology offers in creating a digital essay. This experience informed their knowledge of writing pedagogy as well as their knowledge of multimodal composition and its implementation in the English language arts classroom.

### **Perspectives on Multimodal Writing**

Digital and multimodal writing are "indispensable tool[s] for...communicating" (Graham & Harris, 2013, p. 5) and the use of these tools may be one of the most important issues currently facing literacy educators (Neuman, Smagorinsky, Enciso, Baldwin, & Hartman, 2000). New technologies that allow for the manipulation of audio, image, and video are changing both the composition process and the medium through which writing is created and shared (Grabill & Hicks, 2005). To meet these demands, teachers must consider the pedagogies that account for the various new text forms and mediums (National Writing

Project with DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010; The New London Group, 1996).

A theory of multimodality for writing considers not only traditional written word to be central to meaning-making, but equally accounts for communicative modes of sounds, image, speech, gesture, and objects (Kress, 2003). From this perspective, literacy is understood semiotically and attends to the visual, auditory, and gestural signs and symbols that communicate meaning.

Scholars who examine multimodal writing through a sociocultural lens are interested in understanding how digital tools and modes mediate the composition process of multimodal texts (Shanahan, McVee, & Bailey, 2014). These texts are meaningful within the cultural contexts in which they are composed. The elements used in designing multimodal texts provide modal affordances from which multiple potential representations of meaning can emerge (Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2003). The affordances of digital writing include multiple layers of composition and means of communication that are not possible with traditional text. Such affordances may aid in communicating the author's ideas or providing a new perspective of the author's message. This potential influence of new technologies, modes of composition, and social conditions allows for "new possibilities and constraints for representation and communication" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 243). These affordances and limitations have significant implications for how writing is composed, learned, and taught in classrooms.

Although new technologies may afford new possibilities for composition, researchers have found that preservice and inservice teachers feel uneasy about the use of technology in literacy instruction. Some preservice teachers "resist the idea that writing is changing" (Hundley & Holbrook, 2013, p. 500). This resistance may lead to limiting or avoiding the use of technology in their future classrooms despite the fact that learners gain agency in the process of creating texts within multiple modes of representation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, 2009). Researchers have found that preservice teachers have reservations about the use of nonconventional modes of writing and conceive "real" writing to be traditional print texts (Hundley & Holbrook, 2013).

Current teachers who, unlike their students, were not born into the digital era, are considered digital immigrants (Prensky, 2005). Consequently, teachers may not perceive new forms of writing to be important in literacy instruction (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011). Additionally, a perceived lack of time to use technology as well as the perceived lack of technical support and resources is problematic for some teachers (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011). These resources may include computer software or even appropriate professional development aimed at helping teachers use technology effectively in the classroom. A current challenge of teaching writing is the need to give students a clear understanding of the affordances of technology for the writing process. Although literacy educators may report a strong commitment to integrating digital literacy skills into their instruction, they might not actually engage students in multimodal writing.

Multimodal texts allow for unique and varied expressions of thought in teacher education courses. Literacy educators have entered "into new contexts for writing" (Kress, 2003, p. 16). This brings into question what is being done at the level of teacher education to prepare future literacy teachers for writing instruction that includes multimodal texts. If they are to teach writing using digital tools, future teachers should create the same multimodal texts they will ask their future students to design (Albers, 2014). We present this research on digital essays as one avenue for English teacher educators to incorporate multimodal compositions into their coursework.

## Method

### Context of the Study

This research was designed as a qualitative case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It occurred in a graduate course in teaching writing as a process for K–12 teachers pursuing master’s degrees at a public university in the midwestern United States. The course was also required for English secondary Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students as their methods course. Although the course was a combination of teachers and teacher-candidates, we will refer to the participants in the course as “teachers” for the remainder of this article. Weekly, the teachers explored digital technologies appropriate for the grade level they teach and posted their attempts and reflection on the class wiki. Students read from Hicks’ *Crafting Digital Writing* (2013) and used the accompanying wiki to explore possible tools they could incorporate in their teaching. In addition, other websites and tools were presented for exploration. At the end of the semester, teachers composed a digital essay inspired by the segment “This I Believe,” which airs on National Public Radio (NPR). The digital essay, which articulated what they believed about the teaching of writing, was created using the student’s choice of computer application. Both participants used Windows Movie Maker, but each essay was different visually: One was a series of stock images and text, similar to what one might see in an animated PowerPoint presentation, and the other was a short film shot in the teacher’s home. Teachers were not limited to 350–500 words, as is typical with the NPR “This I Believe” format, and could draw upon any of the digital tools they explored throughout the semester.

### Participants and Data Sources

From the class of 13, we chose two participants to study in depth. We chose these two teachers because they were both early career secondary teachers and provided information-rich cases. Anna completed her undergraduate teacher education program in adolescent and adult English education at a midsize university in the midwestern United States. She was an secondary English teacher (grades 7–12), working as a substitute and searching for a full-time position. Tim also completed his undergraduate studies (in English and political science) in the Midwest. Prior to pursuing his teaching licensure in our M.A.T. program, he worked as an emergency medical technician (EMT) for three and a half years.

Data for this study included the teachers’ digital essay videos and accompanying scripts, metanarratives about the digital essay, a reflection about the experience of composing a digital essay, and transcriptions of face-to-face interviews.

As is customary in digital storytelling (Lambert, 2013), our participants were to think about how the audience would see and hear their essays, which ultimately determined how their message would be conveyed. The audience consisted of Tim and Anna’s classmates and Denise, the course instructor. Our goal was to examine the composition of the digital essay itself and also uncover what the participants learned through the process of creating it. Participants took the course in the Fall 2014 semester and were asked to participate in this study in Spring 2015 in order to avoid influencing their perceptions or ideas about creating the digital essay. Denise taught the course and interviewed the participants. Natasha collaborated with Denise on the data analysis and writing of this article. Each participant was interviewed once for 45–60 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Data was analyzed during the spring and summer of 2015.

## **Data Analysis**

Artifacts collected from the course, interview transcripts, and digital video files were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. We coded these items collaboratively and digitally using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Smagorinsky (2008) argues that collaborative coding provides richer analyses of the data because "... each decision is the result of a serious and thoughtful exchange about what to call each and every data segment" (p. 402). Our initial round of coding yielded 86 codes. We collapsed these codes into 14 categories: affordances of technology, background information, beliefs about the teaching of writing, composition process, connections to course, course content, current teaching practices, future classroom practices, identity/self, past personal experiences, sense of accomplishment, teaching experiences, use of technology, and time and effort.

Digital essays were segmented into scenes. When a new pedagogical concept was introduced, we considered this a new topical scene. We found that these scenes aligned with the visual content of each segment of the video. Typically, the participants used images or objects to illustrate a pedagogical concept. For example, Tim showed tools such as a wrench and a screwdriver from his personal toolbox when stating his belief that teachers need to provide students with a variety of writing tools. Additionally, codes were applied to the composition of each segment in terms of its aural and visual qualities. For example, Anna's video had a segment in which she had added a song from a movie soundtrack. These qualities were noted in order to break down the essay into its individual multimodal components.

In the following section, we describe each essay, followed by our findings. These cases provide insight into the process and use of multimodal composition in the preparation of literacy professionals.

## **Findings**

### **Anna's Digital Essay: The Golden Tickets of Writing Instruction**

Anna's Willy Wonka-themed essay, created with Windows Movie Maker, consisted of a series of stock images separated into five "golden ticket" segments. Her video lasted 4 minutes, 57 seconds.

**Anna's beliefs about teaching writing.** Anna identified five beliefs about teaching writing in her digital essay: the importance of student choice, using mentor texts, the teacher should be a writer as well, teaching different modes of writing, and developing a supportive, nurturing environment. Topic choice was something Anna recalled experiencing in school and believed her students needed as well. She stated, "I believe that students should be free to choose the books that they read, the topics they write about...I think that students who have the power of choice will...become more interested in reading and writing."

Anna also believed that teachers should teach students to "read like writers" and that quality mentor texts would aid in this goal. She believed teachers needed to model writing behaviors to show their students that "mistakes, edits, [and] revisions" are all a part of the writing process. This stemmed from an experience in class, she wrote: "We talked a lot about modeling in class this semester, and I definitely wanted to include that in my beliefs because I think it is so important and we, as teachers, don't think to do it enough." Anna drew upon her new technology experiences for her fourth ticket. She contrasted new modes of writing to "antiquated forms of writing" such as "pencil and paper" and

questioned why teachers would “relegate [students] to using” outdated mediums. Anna identified “the most important” golden ticket of writing instruction as “a collaborative, trusting, safe environment.” She drew from past and course experiences when she stated, “When I think back on all the teachers that I’ve had in my life, the ones I remember and respect the most are those who never judged, never put down, always listened, and were there to help their students.” Anna was adamant that none of the other golden tickets mattered unless you had “this one in your repertoire.”

**Modal representations.** A Willy Wonka theme ran throughout Anna’s digital essay in word, image, and sound. Quotes and allusions to the movie *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971) were present visually and in her voice-over. She used this theme to structure her essay and “divide all [her] ideas up [in a way that] would still make sense.”

Anna primarily displayed her ideas visually, limiting text in her essay; however, she selected a swirly font inspired by the movie when text was used (Figure 1).

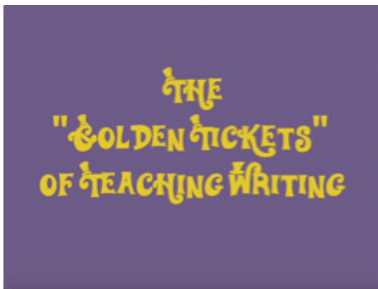


Figure 1: For “The Golden Tickets” of teaching writing, Anna’s used a Willy Wonka-themed font.

In this font, she also quoted the movie: “If you want to view paradise, simply look around and view it. Anything you want to, do it. Want to change the world? There’s nothing to it.” This quote was one she wanted to display in her future classroom.

Anna selected stock images to represent her beliefs using keywords that matched points she was trying to convey. She selected more pictures than she used, choosing images with a clear resolution, and more importantly, ones that represented her beliefs “the best.” Many of her images were of teachers and students, famous authors, books, as well some still-framed images from the movie. One of the most striking images was her opening composite image of herself as “Anna Wonka.” She created the image by superimposing her face onto Willy Wonka’s.

Anna’s composition included her voice-over script, which she read throughout the essay. She felt it was important to use her own voice so that the audience would feel that her words were genuine and authentic: “I think that hearing the essay in my own voice...enables you to see that I strongly believe in what I’m saying.” Layered beneath Anna’s voice was the song “Pure Imagination” from the soundtrack of *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (Anna identified her use of copyrighted material and stated that it would be viewed only within our class).

**Insights from digital essay experience.** Anna’s essay inspiration came when she was search for songs for a classmate to use in her essay. Anna felt that “Pure Imagination” set the direction for her essay. She said, “If someone was reading my paper, they could understand it, but it wouldn’t have the same impact as it does with the visual and auditory help.” Presenting herself as “Anna Wonka” set the tone of the essay, and she



felt the Willy Wonka-themed visuals “definitely add some humor and insight into the topic that you might not have otherwise from just reading a paper.” Lightheartedness was what she was sought, and she shared that it was unlikely she would have produced anything so personal on paper alone.

Anna described spending “hours and hours on making this 5-minute video” and still felt she “could have done more.” Describing herself as a “generally private person,” she found it uncomfortable creating a “very, very personal” essay. At first glance, it might not appear that her lighthearted essay could be considered personal. However, rather than represent her stance solely with words written on paper, she used her own voice and personally selected visuals and background music. These decisions wove her identity more strongly into her essay. As a result, her final product was a more robust representation of her beliefs. She said that her first experience with this kind of essay was memorable: “It definitely got under my skin in a way other assignments haven’t...I didn’t necessarily even intend for that to happen but...it just got under my skin. It was very personal...it doesn’t even feel so much like an assignment, but more just something...creative that I made.” Creating the essay was a way of “hold[ing] up a mirror to myself...as a writer in a way that I really hadn’t before, and that was scary...but also very exciting.”

### **Tim’s Digital Essay: What I Believe About Teaching Writing**

Tim’s digital essay, created with Windows Movie Maker, was a movie filmed in one take by his wife. It was 7 minutes, 7 seconds long. In order to accomplish this single-take shot, they practiced several times. In his digital essay, Tim expressed 15 ideas about the teaching of writing.

**Tim’s beliefs about teaching writing.** Tim began his video with “the primary objective of a writing teacher”: to help students learn to “embrace their own voice and tackle deeper issues that matter to them.” To illustrate this point, he described a blank journal he had won in a writing competition. In it, the judges had written encouraging words. Tim recalled:

I saved this book for a decade and a half, and whenever I begin to doubt my voice or lose confidence in my writing, I open it up, and I read it...I believe that writing teachers must encourage their students—a few words at the right moment can resonate throughout a writer’s life.

Tim believed that reading plays a central role in a writer’s development. He said, “I believe that student writers must be encouraged to read, read, and read some more.” Tim thought “submerg[ing] students in a bath of language” was important. In addition, he stated that students required knowledge beyond grammar to write effectively; he wanted them to be versed in techniques such as “taffy sentences, not-not-is, repetition...fragment use,” use of comparisons, dialogue, proper nouns, and an opening hook. He felt that “well-equipped students will be able to navigate the rich world of writing with these tools.”

Tim believed it was when teachers wrote alongside their students that they demonstrated the “attitude and behavior” of writers. Tim acknowledged that “writing is consistently hard” and added, “but just as physical exercise strengthens the body, frequent writing exercise strengthens and builds the abilities and confidence of the student.” He believed that students need to write every day in class. To showcase this belief, he created a calendar that indicated how often students should write (Figure 2).



Figure 2: “Write Every Day in Class” Tim’s representation of the need to write every day.

Like Anna, Tim underscored the importance of a “safe and comfortable environment for students to write.” He wanted to create a “safe space” where students would develop courage to “put their most revealing truths on the page.”

**Modal representations.** Tim was initially resistant, but once he accepted the assignment, he “commit[ted] to learning the technology” to “make it a fun challenge.” Tim made a commitment to learn how to use Windows Movie Maker, and added to this challenge by shooting the video in a single shot. He shared that it took several tries to get it right. He described his rationale for this decision:

There’s a certain continuity that you get with one shot...not having any breaks for your eye or your ears as you’re experiencing it....why not take advantage of the visual medium...and do something that really engages somebody...when it’s one shot, you can’t look away.

Tim added instrumental music to his narration. When selecting the music, he said, “I chose music that struck me as very reflective without conveying any particular emotion, I think that this combination really set a contemplative mood in my video.” He also felt that using his voice drove “home a certain authenticity that could not be achieved in writing alone.”

Tim showcased his own personal items and writing artifacts because he “wanted to physically show what [he] was talking about” and showed the first short story he wrote at 12 years of age on his “Mac Classic II with a seven-inch screen.” He filmed his personal library and toolbox, a reference to the toolkit Stephen King talks about in his book on writing. Tim showed a wrench, screwdriver, and a measuring tape and labeled them with the words *editing*, *revision*, and *repetition*. He felt it was important to show his personal tools rather than stock images.

Tim created a scene within a scene in which he watched himself teaching on television, a scene enhanced by the digital medium. He explained, "I also wanted my video to be gently humorous here and there, and some of the images, such as me watching myself on television...had a whimsical nature that could not have been conveyed in the same way on the written page." In continuing with his use of objects to illustrate his beliefs about the teaching of writing, Tim showed himself lifting a dumbbell weight labeled "Writing Practice" (Figure 3).

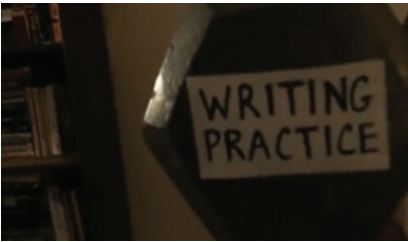


Figure 3: "Writing Practice" illustrates Tim's belief in disciplined writing practice.

Tim commented that this scene was intended to show his belief that

People come into the world with different physical strength, just as people are born with certain writing talents. But just as anyone...can get stronger through exercise, so can any writer grow stronger in their abilities...everyone can improve with enough consistent discipline, practice, and commitment.

Tim represented his idea of the importance of having a "safe space" to write by showing himself sitting on a couch with a pot of tea, mug, and lit candle on the coffee table. In his voiceover, he articulated "classrooms must be a safe and comfortable environment for students to write in [because] [t]he act of writing is profoundly personal and can be very frightening."

He ended his essay by showing photos from his childhood, illustrating his belief that students' personal experiences need to be valued so that they can "write truthfully and from the heart." Tim cycled back to his short story introduced in the beginning and said

For over sixteen years, this, my first short story, lay in a box, at the bottom of a growing pile of other stories, poems, and attempts at novels...Old writings – the good, the bad, and the ugly alike – all provide perspective on your journey as a writer. They're like old friends who show you how far you've come and what lessons you've learned. I think that writing students should be taught to be reflective in this way.

**Insights from the digital essay experience.** There was an element of challenge to the assignment that intrigued Tim. He described it as "intellectually enriching," the kind of assignment where he would be "sitting there...at a grocery line or doing something else or in another class and it'd just be there in the back of my mind." Through this experience he learned to be "more open with the technology," realizing the technology allowed him to express his beliefs about teaching writing that were not possible had he written a traditional essay. He said, "I think it was a far more effective way to convey the information...I learned to start basic with a new skills and steadily work at it until competency is obtained, even if the skill is intimidating at first (and this was)."

For Tim, the technology allowed him to layer personal experiences with his ideas about writing. Tim was thoughtfully reserved in class yet he showcased a personal side in his final product. This sharing of himself was very important to him, he explained:

I wanted to tell the truth...To me, seeing someone's real life journey through the artifacts they collect along the way is a very tangible way to understand who they are. Sometimes it can be more effective than just hearing stories or reading words.

Tim strived for "truthfulness" in his essay, although he was quite nervous about sharing on such a personal level. However, it seemed that the challenge of this assignment pushed Tim in a manner that would not have happened with the traditional format. The digital medium lent itself to provide Tim with an opportunity to share his true beliefs about writing and to engage with the course content.

As a strong writer, Tim could have written a competent essay about his beliefs, but his inexperience with digital tools placed him in a vulnerable state as he searched to represent himself in meaningful and true ways. Tim viewed the assignment as not only an expression of pedagogical knowledge, but also as a mirror of his own experiences and journey as a writer:

I like to keep my private life completely separate from school. But for some reason, this assignment dug down under my skin and I had an overwhelming feeling that to do it right, and truthfully, required me to open up and be personal...I wanted to physically show what I was talking about...I wanted to show some real moments from my life in photos to demonstrate the times that inspire me.

Tim learned that the technology was useful and allowed him to convey a personalized message that, in his words, helped him "take a leap" as a writer.

### **Discussion**

Digitality and literacy are intertwined. Jewitt & Kress (2003) have argued that the shift toward digitality has changed what it means to be literate. Writers, therefore, now need technological knowledge for composing multimodal texts as well as knowledge of design (The New London Group, 1996). Written texts have the potential to be much more than paper and pencil products.

Writing is no longer limited to one-dimensional products but has expanded to include multiple modes of sensory presentation. This intersection of what it means to write and what it means to be a literate writer is critical for current and future English teachers to understand. Therefore, teacher education courses need to address this evolving definition of writing. When teacher educators provide opportunities in courses for teachers to use technology in writing, they can begin to envision how messages are shared, as well as how and why digital tools advance their writing. In this way, they are better positioned for teaching.

This study adds to the literature that has found that teachers are initially hesitant to embrace teaching writing in different ways, yet, by using these same digital tools themselves come to see the possibilities (and difficulties) of using them. Experiences with multimodal compositions have the potential to support teachers in realizing the scope and possibilities inherent within these tools. Immersion into digital tools provides teachers with an understanding of the benefits and challenges involved in digital composition. Initially,

teachers may not always be enthusiastic about using digital platforms for writing, especially given their potential inexperience and the steep learning curve to some digital platforms; however, graduate courses can provide relevant guided experiences with these means. Through mentoring and practice with digital tools, teachers not only gain familiarity with them, they become more competent and confident users.

### **Considerations for Teacher Education**

#### **Nature of the Assignment**

One challenge within teacher education courses is designing assignments that serve multiple means. Digital essays are one avenue for teacher educators to provide opportunities for digital explorations in English teacher education. The "This I Believe" assignment offers a clear organizational structure and format for a digital composition. Like Rish (2013), we have found the "This I Believe" essay to be a "fruitful way to explore multimodal composition processes" (p. 5). The digital essay is a way for teachers to express what they learned and their subsequent beliefs about teaching writing, and it is also an exploration of the tools they could use to teach writing in practice. Thus, this assignment supported teachers in naming and expressing their beliefs about writing while simultaneously exploring various tools to see firsthand that writing is not limited to traditional forms.

Our participants felt the digital essay format afforded them multiple forms of communication to express their personal beliefs in a way that was more effective than a traditional written essay. They each incorporated personal aspects of their own lives. Tim showed personal artifacts from his "writer's past" and filmed in his own home. Anna incorporated images of herself into her essay and made intentional decisions about the images and music she selected. The combining of technology and multiple modes of expressing their beliefs in image, video, and sound enhanced the messages they conveyed about their beliefs.

There were parallel rewards of effort and pride with their essays. It could be that the personal nature of the task, articulating their ideas about teaching writing, fueled their willingness to devote time and effort to this project. Individually, each noted the time they put into the assignment along with the sense of pride at the final product (even though Tim was initially doubtful of the task).

As teacher educators, we believe it is important for teachers to examine the role of multimodal compositions in the teaching of writing through first-hand experience. Creating multimodal compositions affords the opportunity for teachers to reconsider the role of technology in the teaching of writing. In this study, two teachers created their first multimodal compositions. Both came to realize what was possible when using digital tools in their essays and recognized how they were able to capture ideas and feelings in a way that words alone simply could not do. Their compositions show how digital tools, though often deemed impersonal or socially distancing, can be used to craft personally meaningful stories that are simultaneously rich with academic content.

#### **Potential Changes and Adjustments**

In this course, teachers explored multiple digital tools that appealed to them; weekly, they created something using one of the tools and posted their experiences on their personal page within the class wiki. Then for their essays, they selected the tool they most wanted to use. Another option, given the diversity of digital tools that could potentially be explored in English teacher education programs, is to focus one or two tools or platforms

rather than having teachers try various tools in less depth. In this way, teachers can rely on one another when they need assistance with the technology, and they can become progressively familiar with a digital tool throughout the semester.

Another potential adjustment that could be made to this assignment would be to have two smaller assignments, with one due at the midpoint of the semester and the other due as a culminating task. Perhaps this setup would allow students to have personal revelations about the power of digital tools sooner than at the end of a course. The benefits of this approach can be seen in Tim's case, especially: "Learning to be more open with the technology...[and] learning the skills to make [the video] was a long, transformative journey for me, and I'm starting to think that perhaps I should offer a similar assignment to my students." Anna agreed that using technology in her classroom was necessary; she wanted to "use technology as much as possible in [her] future classroom." Perhaps these realizations could have come sooner had a digital assignment or part of the digital essay been due earlier in the semester. We saw a change in their dispositions toward using the technology, but it was not until the end of the course that they realized the role digital composition could play in their own teaching.

As in traditional writing, the study of mentor texts is critical (Ray, 2006). In this course, teachers examined several digital essays while learning to create their own. More intentional explorations of digital compositions may be needed to support the composition process so more focused attention can be paid to the visuals, sounds, and tone of the composition.

### **Opportunities to Share Personal Aspects of Self**

Writing is a personal act, and opportunities to share oneself as writers are critical to the writing process. Even though the content of the essay was based on the understandings and beliefs they developed within the course, teachers managed to express personal stories through the multiple modes afforded to them in this format. This reveals that "Writers write to participate in social situations," (Bazerman, 2016, p. 11), expressing their own thoughts, values, and identities publicly. The teachers surprised themselves with how much their personalities came through in their multimodal compositions. Tim, a self-described "private person," filmed in his home and revealed his past writing experiences through sharing routines and objects that were personally meaningful to him. Anna showed her "silly but serious" personality through the Willy Wonka theme, which she said described her "to a tee." In addition, both participants narrated their compositions and agreed that adding their voices communicated authenticity in their beliefs about the teaching of writing.

We acknowledge that these changes in teachers' dispositions toward using technology for the purposes of multimodal composition are limited to two participants; however, we believe that these findings illustrate that the digital essay assignment is one way that teacher educators can engage prospective and practicing teachers in meaningful expressions of pedagogical knowledge while simultaneously introducing them to multimodal writing and its role in the classroom. In their essays, Tim and Anna did not speak specifically to the use of digital tools in their teaching of writing. It may be that because the participants were in the process of composing their digital essays, they did not know the benefit of the activity until they completed it and reflected back on the experience. This investigation did uncover the pedagogical understandings teachers identified as their beliefs about writing at the end of a course about teaching writing as a process. They represented those ideas in a digital composition and expressed what they learned from participating in the process of composing a digital essay.

## Concluding Thoughts

This study found that a digital essay assignment, within the format of a "This I Believe" essay, shaped teachers' ideas about how they could use digital tools to teach writing. This experience occurred in a graduate course with students who were either practicing teachers or seeking licensure for the first time. We believe, as others have found, that these kinds of experiences could also be valuable for undergraduate language arts methods courses (Albers, 2014; Wederich & Manderino, 2013). Whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, these courses potentially shape teachers' and teacher candidates' beliefs about writing pedagogy, which may ultimately influence their teaching practices. It is critical that these courses attend to multiple modes of writing and move beyond the traditional definition of writing. We believe that the experience of creating a digital essay provides an opportunity for teachers to understand the potential of multimodal composition in their own teaching of writing. This experience afforded the opportunity to see how the technology could be useful in their own classrooms. Even though teachers may be initially hesitant using technology, providing opportunities to design digital compositions supports seeing how writing and writing instruction can be "reimagined" (Hicks, Turner, & Stratton, 2013) in today's classrooms.

## References

- Albers, P. (2011). Double exposure: A critical study of preservice teachers' multimodal public service announcements. *Multimodal Communication, 1*(1), 47–64.
- Albers, P. (2014). Digital writing and the role of critical pedagogy in preservice teacher education. In R. E. Ferdig & K. E. Pytash (Eds.), *Exploring multimodal composition and digital writing* (pp. 98–115). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Alvermann, D. E. (2008). Why bother theorizing adolescents' online literacies for classroom practice and research? *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 51*(1), 8–19.
- Bazerman, C. (2016). What do sociocultural studies of writing tell us about learning to write? In C.A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (2nd ed., pp. 11–23). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London, England: Routledge.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). 'Multiliteracies': New literacies, new learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 4*(3), 164–195.
- Doering, A., Beach, R., & O'Brien, D. G. (2007). Infusing multimodal tools and digital literacies into an English education program. *English Education, 40*, 41–60.
- Ferdig, R. E., & Pytash, K. E. (Eds.). (2014). *Exploring multimodal composition and digital writing*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine Publishing.
- Grabill, J. T., & Hicks, T. (2005). Multiliteracies meet methods: The case for digital writing in English education. *English Education, 37*(4), 301–311.

- Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2013). Designing an effective writing program. In S. Graham, C. A. MacArthur, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction* (2nd ed., pp. 3–35). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hicks, T. (2013). *Crafting digital writing: Composing texts across media and genres*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hicks, T., Russo, A., Autrey, T., Gardner, R., Kabodian, A., & Edington, C. (2007). Rethinking the purposes and processes for designing digital portfolios. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(6), 450–458.
- Hicks, T., Turner, K., & Stratton, J. (2013). Reimagining a writer's process through digital storytelling. *Learning Landscapes*, 6(2), 167–183.
- Hull, G. (2009, February). *Social networking on the internet: Global youth, digital media, and 21st century literacies*. Paper presented at the International Reading Association Research Conference. Phoenix, AZ.
- Hundley, M., & Holbrook, T. (2013). Set in stone or set in motion? Multimodal and digital writing with preservice English teachers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56(6), 500–509.
- Hutchison, A., & Reinking, D. (2011). Teachers' perceptions of integrating information and communication technologies into literacy instruction: A national survey in the United States. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(4), 312–333.
- Jewitt, C. (2008). Multimodality and literacy in school classrooms. *Review of Research in Education*, 32, 241–267.
- Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. R. (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lambert, J. (2013). *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New literacies* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2009). *Writing in the 21st century*. Retrieved from [http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Press/Yancey\\_final.pdf](http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Press/Yancey_final.pdf).
- National Writing Project, Devoss, D., Eidman-Aadahl, E., & Hicks, T. (2010). *Because digital writing matters: Improving student writing in online and multimedia environments*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Neuman, S. B., Smagorinsky, P., Enciso, P. E., Baldwin, R. S., & Hartman, D. K. (2000). What will be the influences of media on literacy in the next millennium? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 276–282.
- Prensky, M. (2005). Listen to the natives. *Educational Leadership*, 63(4), 8–13.
- Pytash, K. E., Testa, E., & Nigh, J. (2015). Writing the world: Preservice teachers' perceptions of 21st century writing instruction. *The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, 4(1), 142–163.



- Ray, K. W. (2006). *Study driven: A framework for planning units of study in the writing workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rish, R. (2013). Exploring multimodal composing processes with preservice teachers. In Pytash, K. E., Ferdig, R. E., & Rasinski, T. (Eds.), *Preparing teachers to teach writing using technology* (pp. 1–16). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press.
- Shanahan, L. E., McVee, M. B., & Bailey, N. M. (2014). Multimodality in action: New literacies as more than activity in the middle and high school classrooms. In R. E. Smagorinsky, P. (2008). The method section as conceptual epicenter in constructing social science research reports. *Written Communication*, 25(3), 389–411.
- The New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Education Review*, 66(1), 60–92.
- Werderich, D.E., & Manderino, M. (2013). The multimedia memoir: Leveraging multimodality to facilitate the teaching of writing for preservice teachers. In R.E. Ferdig & K. E. Pytash (Eds.), *Exploring multimodal composition and digital writing* (pp. 316–330). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

#### **About the Authors**

Denise N. Morgan is a Professor of Literacy Education at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. Since 2010, Denise has served as Director of the Reading and Writing Center at Kent State. Her research interests include teacher education, understanding students' development as readers and writers, and long-term professional development.

Natasha H. Chenowith, Ph.D., recently completed her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Kent State University. Her research focuses on the teaching of writing to English language learners. She is a professional development consultant and owner of *Language Learning Innovations, LLC*. She is the managing editor of the *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*.