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From Wordstar to the Blogosphere and Beyond: A Digital Literacy and Teaching Narrative (Epiphany Included)

In the Beginning: Word Processors

Like most of us, I have been serious about my writing since I was a teenager. This meant that in addition to writing obsessively, I read anything I could get my hands on about the writing process, which in the early 80's was not much. Since *Poets and Writers* didn't exist at the time, this also meant that I read *Writer's Digest* and *The Writer* magazines religiously.

Back then, *Writer's Digest* in particular was all hepped up about this new technology that was going to be a game changer for writers: the word processor. As someone who didn't even own a typewriter but who filled dozens of legal pads with stories and poems and novels, I could see the potential in a system that would make it possible to erase without correction fluid, to cut and paste without scissors and glue. I began to lust after the computers featured in the pages of every issue, computers with names like Kaypro and DEC, and programs like "Wordstar" and "WordPerfect." To demonstrate my commitment to the people who held the purse strings (my family), I learned typing in high school and even took a summer community education course in word processing between my junior and senior year. Yes. Summer school. I wanted a word processor bad.

My dedication worked. I received my first computer, the Macintosh 128K, in 1985 as a joint high school graduation present from my parents and my great-aunt Betty, an independent woman who had always encouraged me in writing and in life. A retired high school business

teacher herself, she also understood the importance of keeping up with technology and in owning her own Radio Shack Tandy 1000, was well ahead of the other senior citizens of her time. I'm certain if Aunt Betty were still alive today (at 96), she'd be on Facebook or at least e-mail.

In addition to providing me a nice side income typing papers (\$1/page, \$2 if you wanted me to edit), owning a Mac as I began college and my writing career meant writing and technology have always been wed in my mind. One enabled the other. The first stories I wrote for Blanche Boyd's fiction workshop were written on that Mac, though eventually they overwhelmed its miniscule memory capacity. My MFA thesis at George Mason University was written on the now-extinct Compu-Add, a PC clone that was all I could afford during my salad days. During our doctoral work at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, I shared a Mac Color Classic with my husband. I was issued a PC in my first tenure-track job, and it was on various iterations of these that I wrote my first three books. By late 2012 however, my patience sorely tested by viruses and malware, I returned to my Apple roots and have never looked back. I am writing this essay on a MacBook Air, a computer I hope to own for a long time.

Teaching With Technology 1.0

In my early days of teaching, integrating technology in the classroom meant little more than requiring that my students used email and turned in their assignments typed (word-processed). Still, even in the late nineties and early 2000's, before Web 2.0 had truly reconfigured the literary landscape, I began to understand that technology could do a great deal more than revolutionize composing and editing. The advent of the Internet and the dramatic rise of resources for writers on the web meant that while young writers of my own generation had to make do with a few monthly writing magazines and a handful of books, half of which seemed to have been written by John Gardner; for my students, hundreds of writing sites and communities

were just a few clicks away. Some of them understood this—some of my students knew more about resources for writers on the Internet than I did—but most of them didn’t. This gap was the inspiration behind my “Top Ten Writing Websites” assignment, a staple of all of my early creative writing courses, which required students to research and create an annotated list of web sites tailored to their interests and development as writers. Each student presented her list to the entire class, exponentially expanding every class member’s repertoire of writing sites, including my own.

The Cyber-World Tour

Meanwhile, a lifelong anglophile, I happened upon a handful of nascent websites about creative writing programs in the United Kingdom around this time and was hooked by what I saw as a completely different approach to the field. Between 2001 and 2006 (when, with the generous support of my university, I was actually able to undertake a six-week study-tour of UK creative writing programs) I scoured the Internet for information about the history of such programs in Great Britain. Amazingly, government reports and data (e.g., the essential 1996 Dearing Report) that contextualized such programs were available at my fingertips. Most importantly, I met key figures in the UK creative writing movement (Graeme Harper, Paul Munden, Steve May, Maggie Butt and Mimi Thebo, to name a few) who generously communicated with me via email (later in person) and answered my many questions about how creative writing was taught in the UK. All of this research—occasionally in person but largely online—informed my understanding of what the US might learn from the UK about creative writing in higher education, an understanding that has significantly influenced my own theories about creative writing pedagogy.

In short, my career would not exist without technology, specifically the Internet.

Meanwhile, Back in the Classroom: Teaching with Technology 2.0

Nonetheless, for years, my creative writing courses trundled along with the lone “Top Ten Writing Websites” assignment as my nod to the digital realm. Overwhelmed by the rise of Web 2.0, during which the Internet interface of the moment seemed to change on a daily basis, as well as by the writing and teaching duties of the tenure track, I began to despair of ever being able to expand my students’ digital literacy while at the same time focusing on the critical issues of craft that would enhance their development as writers. I certainly didn’t want to teach technical writing, and without a background in that field, I had no business doing so. But I knew that the writing landscape my students were graduating into was powerfully influenced by a literary world that was becoming increasingly digital, and I couldn’t leave them unprepared for that.

The Epiphany

Two essays I read in 2010 solved this dilemma for me. One was Alanna Frost, Julia A. Myatt and Stephen Smith’s “Multiple Modes of Production in a College Writing Class” in the 2009 collection *Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change and Assessment in the 21st Century Classroom*. Frost, Myatt and Smith acknowledge that what holds many teachers back in terms of technology is the fear that they can’t possibly keep up with the rapidly changing pace of knowledge in the digital world. What we don’t realize, they assure us, is: *we don’t have to*. What teachers need to do is to bring this world into the classroom and encourage students to teach themselves.

At around the same time that I received this blessed absolution from Frost, Myatt and Smith, I read a post on *Insidehighered.com* by Technology and Learning blogger Joshua Kim titled “10 Competencies for Every Graduate” in which Kim argues, “Every job is a technology job.

Technology is baked into each aspect of work.” According to Kim, as of 2010, students graduating from college should be able to:

1. Start a Blog
2. Buy an Audio Recorder and Learn to Use It
3. Start Editing Audio
4. Post an Interview (or Podcast) on [their] Blog
5. Learn How to Shoot, Crop, Tone, and Optimize Photos (And Add Them to [their] Blog)
6. Learn to Create Effective Voice-Over Presentations with Rapid Authoring Software
7. Tell a Good Story with Images and Sound
8. Learn to Shoot Video
9. Edit [their] Video with iMovie or Windows Movie Maker
10. Publish [their] Video on [their] Blog.

Obviously, this was a list that would evolve and change, but I saw it as a start. Between this list and Frost, Myatt and Smith’s article, I was coming to understand that what I needed to do in my creative writing classes, while focusing on essential issues of craft and art, was to establish in my students the kind of *mindset* that would enable them to succeed in a 21st century literary context without actually teaching them technological skills (which would probably be outdated by the end of the course anyway). That is, my students would need to become the kind of lifelong learners who could *teach themselves* those skills, competencies that would change according to their own situations and contingencies for the rest of their lives.

To wit, I began to assign *at least* one digital project in every creative writing class, including and especially in the creative nonfiction courses I often teach. How the students would interpret and deliver those projects would be up to them, however. In this way, they could customize their own learning. For example, each of my upper division creative writing courses requires students to

read and reflect on a book of choice in that genre, from a list I provide. Of course, we read and discuss other course texts together, but I want students to be able to explore the genre in a way that best relates to the kind of writing they are doing at the time. For example, one student exploring the visible genetic condition she was born with might find her work best informed by Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, while another investigating the impact of her father's mental illness on her family might be more interested in Mira Bartok's *The Memory Palace*. In years past students ultimately did a poster presentation on this book (thus informing the rest of the class of books they might want to read); however, after 2010 I decided this presentation must always be digital. Students may complete this presentation in any number of multimodal ways that interest them—they might do a standard Prezi on the book, they might create a website about the book, they might create a digital story about the book, or they might present the book in a digital format that I haven't thought of yet (but which has been cleared by me), an option that acknowledges that as a "non-digital native" I may not know all of the possibilities that exist for digital presentation but I don't want to limit my students' "digital native" creativity. What's more, students must archive this presentation on the course website so that it will provide a resource that will outlive the class.

Because the literary blogosphere is so active—one which I want my students to not only be aware of but also to participate in—I also build regular discussions of it into the syllabus. In a sense, this is a further evolution of the "top websites" assignment. Early in the semester, I ask students to come up with a list of creative nonfiction blogs, online journals and websites they will follow (beginning with some suggestions from me), and then at periodic points throughout the semester, I ask them to bring in topics from those websites for class discussion. At times, I have also encouraged students to keep blogs about or tweet class content—whatever the social media du jour is—so that they participate in the literary cyberworld as much as read about it. Many

students have communicated with writers they admire this way and even found mentors. Alumni have often told me that these skills have served them well in the job market after they graduated. More than anything, however, I'm interested in creating students who have a mindset that will lead them to reading and analyzing the most current literary outlets on the Internet rather than in teaching them how to write for any one of them in particular.

Of course, the most important aspect of these assignments is that they are student-driven. That is, the onus is on the students to identify the digital practices most relevant to them as writers and to learn and participate in those practices in such a way that enhances their writing—something they will need to do long after they leave my classroom. In being student-driven, moreover, learning in my classes is often more cutting edge and of the moment than it would be if it was driven by me, their non-digital-native professor, someone struggling to keep up with what's happening in the online literary landscape. Finally, in terms of digital knowledge, students teach me as much as I teach them and learn how to teach themselves for the rest of their lives, leaving me free to concentrate on the craft issues that are central to the course.

I've come a long way from my vintage Macintosh—but I like to think Aunt Betty would approve.

Work Cited

Frost, Alanna, Myatt, Julie A. and Stephen Smith. "Multiple Modes of Production in a College Writing Class." *Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change and Assessment in the 21st Century Classroom*. Herrington, Anne., Hodgson, Kevin and Charles Moran, eds. New York: Teachers College P, 2009, 181-197.

Kim, Jordan. "10 Competencies for Every Graduate." *InsideHigherEd*. Web. 3 January 2014.