

Fall 2011

## **“That’s not Writing”: Exploring the Intersection of Digital Writing, Community Literacy, and Social Justice**

Kristen Turner  
*Fordham University*, [kturner@fordham.edu](mailto:kturner@fordham.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Turner, Kristen. “That’s Not Writing’: Exploring the Intersection of Digital Writing, Community Literacy, and Social Justice.” *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 55–78, doi:10.25148/clj.6.1.009406.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

## **“That’s not Writing’’: Exploring the Intersection of Digital Writing, Community Literacy, and Social Justice**

*Kristen Hawley Turner and Troy Hicks*

---

Communities—and their literacies—exist within larger contexts, and writing has the potential to empower or oppress, to maintain the status quo, or to transform the collective community. School is one such context and, in recent years, the nature of writing has changed; digital writing skills needed to participate in contemporary society do not always resemble skills of traditional, school-based literacy. This article examines the teaching of digital writing as an issue of social justice by sharing the perspectives of several novice teachers who were challenged to alter their views of what writing is and how it should be taught.

---

Communities—and their literacies—exist within what Lisa Delpit describes as a “culture of power” (25). Ways of being literate—especially the way we write—follow certain codes, many of them tacit. Inasmuch as writing serves as a communicative tool, a representation of self, and a vehicle for articulating perspectives, writing is a part of the culture of power. It has the potential to empower or oppress individuals, and it has the potential to maintain the status quo or transform the collective community. Countless reports, research studies, and personal stories have emphasized the importance of writing for postsecondary and workplace success, and in the current age, networked, digital writing has taken hold as a powerful tool for political and social action, uniting local and global communities in common agendas for action. However, despite significant efforts to improve the teaching of writing in America’s schools, test scores stagnate, businesses bemoan the skills that workers bring with them after high school, higher education institutions report on the ways in which students are ill-prepared for college-level writing (see, for instance, many reports from The National Commission on Writing), and adolescents do not understand the Internet as a place where writing occurs (Lenhart, et al.). Thus, the problem of inferior writing skills extends beyond schooling; weak writing affects entire communities.

Since schools and teachers have the potential either to reinforce existing power structures related to writing, such as the “five-paragraph

essay,” or to provide alternative opportunities for written expression, the classroom is a critical space for community literacy. We agree with Jeffrey T. Grabill, who argues that “those of us concerned with community literacies should *focus on the procedures by which communities are constructed* and the related social institutions that result” (92–93, emphasis his). Schools have been and continue to be at the ideological front lines in competing discussions about literacy. If we care about community literacy, then we inherently care about how writing is taught, or not taught, in schools.

Thus, as two academics who write professionally, who are parents supportive of our children’s literacy development, and who are citizens who both consume and contribute to societal discourse through writing, we see the teaching of writing as an act of social justice, an act that seeks to empower the voices of individuals and, by extension, their communities. More importantly, we aim to instill this belief in the English teachers with whom we work. Miller and Kirkland assert:

English teaching, English teacher preparation, and language and literacy research and policies are political activities that mediate relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and meaning-making processes. Such relationships, we believe, have direct implications for how we achieve equity and access in English classrooms. (9)

This line of thinking has grown from a rich tradition of research and theory that focuses on the social context of writing and literacy development (e.g., Vygotsky), the power of home language and dialect (e.g., Brandt, Heath, Gee), and the effects of a deficit-based approach on students’ self-confidence and literacy achievement (e.g., Delpit). As English teacher educators, we hope to inspire our teaching candidates to understand, value, and build upon the literacies that their adolescent students bring to the classroom and the competencies that they develop in their out-of-school communities, and to explore newer literacies and technologies that are becoming critical skills of citizenship (e.g., Kajder, Leu et al., New London Group, Ohler).

However, our goals are not easily attained as we combat deeply rooted traditions in teaching and learning that do not always align with the development of literacy skills in a globalized, multicultural, and digital world. Grabill suggests that “functional/technocratic literacies are institutionally powerful and ideologically pervasive, making them difficult to displace with alternative notions of literacy” (109), and we as English educators work within and against countless debates about what gets taught in America’s classrooms. Scholars, politicians, clergy, business people, school board members, parents, textbook companies, and teachers—not to mention students themselves—all have a stake in literacy instruction, yet

the current trend toward national standards, high-stakes assessment, and teacher accountability virtually ignores the community-based literacies that contribute to a functioning society. In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama publicly acknowledged the fact that testing has insidiously pervaded our educational system, and in the case of teaching writing, this myopic focus on test scores drastically affects instruction (Hillocks). Scripted literacy programs and formulaic approaches to teaching writing dominate in many schools in this country. This pedagogy does not inspire creativity and expression in today's youth, and it does not connect to the larger community outside of school.

It is our belief that teachers of English, with adequate resources and training, are poised to address this problem from the classroom, connecting the literacies of students' lives that are increasingly networked and digital with the academic skills they need to succeed in school and work. However, in order to embrace contemporary understandings of writing, teachers must first uncover their own biases and develop their own literacies. For this reason, we borrow the principle of "teacher as writer" from the National Writing Project (NWP) and argue that teachers, regardless of their facility with technology or their personal writing practices or past academic experiences, must engage as digital writers. In this article, we highlight the experiences of Kristen and the Teach for America (TFA) corps members whom she taught in a course about the teaching of writing during spring 2011. Kristen invited Troy to act as an outside consultant for the TFA students as she introduced these novice English teachers to digital writing as a viable alternative to traditional academic prose. Though we had first hoped to document *how* to integrate digital writing into English education, our work with Kristen's students quickly turned toward a deeper explanation of *why* teachers of writing must embrace digital writing as a composition process in order to help their students to participate in larger conversations about what it means to be literate as well as what it means to participate in a community.

In order to describe what happened with Kristen's students—and why digital writing matters to community literacy—we first outline an argument for connecting the concepts of community literacy to the pedagogical approach of teaching digital writing and then, through an analysis of student work and transcripts of a class discussion, describe the perceptions that Kristen's TFA students have about teaching writing in general and digital writing in particular. As digital literacies are increasingly becoming literacies of power and privilege, and as teachers are challenged to find ways to better integrate them into classroom instruction, we argue that teaching digital writing is an issue of community literacy—one with local and global consequences.

## Connecting Community Literacy and Digital Writing

While the social turn in literacy studies has allowed us to better understand how individuals learn to become literate in their homes, schools, and communities, concurrently other researchers have been examining the effects of digital technologies, especially the networked computer, on the ways in which we read, write, and communicate with audiences beyond our immediate surroundings. As with all debates in literacy, the question of nomenclature arises as educators consider teaching “21st century skills” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills), “digital age learning” (International Society for Technology in Education), “multimodal literacies” (National Council of Teachers of English, “Position Statement”), or “information and communications technologies” (Kempster Group). For purposes of our scholarship and teaching, we choose to focus on the term *digital writing*, and we do so for two reasons.

First, we see the term “digital writing” as one that is broad, encompassing both the set of skills needed to operate technologies as well as to present a message in a rhetorically sophisticated way. The authors of *Because Digital Writing Matters* define digital writing as “*compositions created with, and often times for reading or viewing on, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet*” (NWP, 7, emphasis in original). Compositions can include a variety of textual forms, including alphabetic print, photographs, charts, videos, music, narration, sound effects, or any other media that can be created, remixed, and distributed online. Community literacy, in this sense, connects to the idea that the writing done inside of school, traditionally limited to genres such as “the book report,” “the research paper,” or the “five-paragraph essay,” can now be enhanced or replaced by digital writing tools that individuals use in professional and social settings, such as laptops, smart phones, cameras, and tablets, and then distributed through blogs, wikis, podcasts, or videos. In the transformation from school-based text to digital text, however, the writing itself is transformed. Digital writing is both local and global, combining elements of multimedia in creative ways to express thoughts and opinions to a real audience that participates in a virtual community of readers and writers. Digital writing is not confined to the classroom corkboard or refrigerator door and, under the right circumstances, it has the power to influence communities.

Second, “digital writing” is an important term for us to keep in mind as teachers of writing, teachers who have an interest in how our students perceive themselves as writers in an increasingly interconnected world. We agree with Jabari Mahiri, who claims:

Teachers [need] to have a much better understanding of the actual experiences, interests, and skills of the young people in their classrooms in order to create effective instructional designs. Fueled by rapid technological change, youth interests and skills are highly mutable. Consequently, even teachers who are under thirty cannot use their own backgrounds as templates for the digital experiences of contemporary youth, because many of the online social networks and other digital spaces youth currently inhabit barely existed a decade ago. (144)

Though our K–12 students and the preservice teachers with whom we work are popularly characterized as “digital natives” (Prensky) or the “net generation” (Tapscott), their comfort level with trying new technologies does not make them automatically savvy in their use. Digital writing is about more than learning how to keyboard quickly or insert an image into a slide deck. These functional skills are important; yet more important is an ability to transform text, image, and sound for critical, rhetorical, and social purposes. Because we see these skills as related to the development of self, particularly the self as a writer, we feel that the term “digital writing” provides teachers and students with some sense of agency.

Often, swayed by the perception that their adolescent students are more proficient users of technology than the teachers at the head of their classrooms, educators believe that, as one administrator told Kristen, “The children are getting [experience with technology] at home,” and schools have neither the resources nor the responsibility to teach digital writing. We can no longer afford to harbor this belief, as years of literacy research has demonstrated that not all students enter the classroom with similar literacy histories, nor with the same access to the tools and support needed to acquire a literacy of power. Statistics about technological access and use prove that the digital divide still exists (e.g., Pew Internet), and the adolescents whom we teach—often characterized as digitally proficient—are, in fact, extremely disparate in their abilities to use technology outside of school for purposes other than socializing (Ito, et al.).

However, we know that creating digital citizens is crucial. Bennett describes the literacy practices of privileged adolescents in this way:

Digital media provide those young people who have access to it an important set of tools to build social and personal identity and to create the on- and offline environments in which they spend their time. . . . The future of democracy is in the hands of these young citizens of the so-called digital age. Many young citizens in more economically prosperous societies already have in their hands the tools of change: digital media, from

laptops, pagers, and cell phones to the convergences of the next new things. These new media reposition their users in society, making them both producers and consumers of information. Perhaps more important, they enable rapid formation of large-scale networks that may focus their energies in critical moments. (8–9)

The access enjoyed by certain communities enables youth from those communities to engage in digital writing as a social act. In so doing, these young people affect the nature of the communities in which they participate and further develop their digital literacy. Those communities who do not have this same access will continue to fall behind in global participation. Teaching digital writing, then, is an act of community literacy. Although situated in the context of schooling, teachers have an opportunity to help their students see writing for real-world purposes. They can encourage them to engage in communities of readers and writers outside the walls of their classrooms, an act that will develop their digital literacies and their participation as citizens. Digital writing is more than simply texting or being able to surf the web; it is a rhetorical and intentional act, and has the potential to empower individuals and communities.

How, then, do we engage K–12 students and, more importantly, their teachers in the process of teaching digital writing, both for the immediate purpose of helping them develop their literacy skills as well as for the equally important goal of creating opportunities for social and political participation? Telling them about examples from the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or the protests of SOPA/PIPA will, like most historical examples of protest, spark few individuals to act. As English teacher educators, we are committed to fostering agency and to guiding novice teachers to develop the capacity to teach for social change (see, for instance, Bomer and Bomer, Christensen, Grant and Agosto, Morrell, Winter and Robbins) and to create classrooms as spaces where they can promote equity and build civic participation among their adolescent learners. We do not want teachers simply to point out examples and move to the next item in the curriculum. Teachers of writing have the opportunity to engage students with a variety of technologies—and, more importantly, a variety of issues—that can inform and empower. Thus, English teachers are poised to bridge the digital divide by integrating newer literacies into technologically rich and pedagogically sound classroom practices, leading ultimately to more competent digital citizens. This work requires that we counteract oppositional forces that do not value the kinds of digital writing that we advocate in schools. In many instances, school-based visions of digital literacy are about keyboarding skills, not about composing media-rich texts for distribution to authentic and diverse audiences on the Internet.

Furthermore, though we work with novice teachers of the millennial generation, we continue to push up against the traditional conceptions of literacy that they themselves hold. For instance, Sally<sup>1</sup>, a second-year teacher from Kristen's class who was seeking alternate-route certification, described her own experience in teaching digital writing in a written reflection:

I'm spending a half hour really doing writing, and then I'm spending 45 minutes playing with fonts and trying to make words move and trying to make sure it's visually acceptable. . . . And then I see my students are spending 10 minutes jotting something down really quickly and then 40 minutes playing with the background and the effects and the fonts. . . . Can I afford to let them fool around like that? That's not writing.

Sally's view that digital writing is something separate from "real" writing reflects a clear tension in English teacher education and—as is evidenced by the choice of our title for this article—one that we must address. In some ways, we agree; simply manipulating a font or background without critically examining the audience, purpose, and situation for the writing might be seen as just "playing." Sally and her peers may, as young adults, use digital tools and participate in digital spaces socially, but they may not recognize the transformative promise of digital writing. They may not yet realize that the nature of writing in society has changed and that they need to convey this change to their own students. In essence, today's young teachers may not have experienced such a change in writing practices themselves.

Thus, our broader goals as teacher educators often come into conflict with the practical concerns of the teacher candidates in our courses. Transitioning their conceptions of pedagogy to align with the rapidly evolving literacies of the twenty-first century requires teachers to develop their own understandings and then to enact change in their classrooms, their schools, and their communities that are governed by so many forces. For many young teachers, taking this step involves challenging policy, practice, and traditional conceptions of writing, conceptions held by themselves and their students. We see this needed action as an issue of social justice, a process of achieving equity across the digital divide; our pre-certified teachers see it as action they cannot take in classrooms that must conform to the pressures of standardized assessments. This view is clearly represented by the voices of the preservice teachers in Kristen's course, and it is to these views we turn our attention next.



## Context for the Course

Teaching in a large city that has, by necessity, encouraged recruitment of noncertified content experts to fill teaching positions, Kristen's nontraditional students seek alternate-route certification during their first few years of teaching. Partnering with Teach for America (TFA), an organization that is "building the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting our nation's most promising future leaders in the effort" (Teach for America), the university's school of education has been committed to training these individuals who are placed in high-needs schools in the city. While we agree with other scholars who have acknowledged the shortcomings of TFA's approach to teacher education (Darling-Hammond, Popkewitz, Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, Darling-Hammond, et al, Labaree), our focus for this study is on the young men and women who join this effort—all of whom are energetic and eager to learn pedagogical strategies that will help urban youth—and their perceptions of digital writing. They come to the TFA experience with strong backgrounds in their discipline; for corps members assigned to English Language Arts classrooms, their undergraduate training in literature and composition marks them as extremely successful readers and writers in academic contexts.

Despite their competence as readers and writers, these young teachers have just begun to understand and participate in the changing ecology of literacy described above, particularly in adopting a view that digital writing is worthy of attention in schools. Grabill and Hicks argue that "[u]sing ICTs (Information Communication Technologies) isn't enough; critically understanding how these writing technologies enable new literacies and meaningful communication should also be a core curricular and pedagogical function of English education" (307). While our experience as teacher educators, especially in the context of Kristen's course, shows us that adopting this perspective is difficult, we feel that there are compelling social reasons to do so.

To teach for social justice, Giroux suggests, "Rather than passively accepting information or embracing a false consciousness, teachers [should] take a much more active role in leading, learning, and reflecting upon their relationship with their practice and the social context in which the practice is situated" (qtd. in Grant and Agosto 180). As teacher educators, we must facilitate our students' reflection and encourage their action, helping them to move beyond passive acceptance of traditional notions of literacy. In the spirit of social justice, we believe that digital literacy is an emerging human right and that it is vital for community development and citizenship. If popular discourse provides a chance to rethink what we want our schools and students to accomplish, then it is concerning that the actual practice

of teaching digital writing in teacher education seems slow to catch up. Most students graduating with disciplinary credentials that will certify them to teach English have not formally studied digital forms of writing. Unfortunately, in today's information age, being an expert in English does not mean that a teacher is an expert in teaching twenty-first-century literacies. We argue that teachers who do not embrace contemporary notions of literacy cannot, ultimately, achieve the goal of teaching for social justice. If there is a space for us to approach educators so that they might bridge the digital divide with their students, TFA corps members, who are teaching some of the nation's most at-risk youth, represent a population we must target.

Grounded firmly in the belief that teaching for equity and social change in contemporary society involves teaching new modes of writing, Kristen created a course on teaching writing for a cohort of TFA English teachers in the spring of 2011. She hoped the course would inspire them to rethink traditional notions of writing and to enact change in their classrooms, schools, and communities by incorporating digital writing into their teaching. Kristen designed the course in the spirit of NWP core principles that teachers "examine theory, research, and practice together systematically" (National Writing Project) and that teachers of writing must write themselves. They explored questions such as these:

- What is writing? What do writers do?
- Who am I as a writer? As a teacher of writing?
- What works in writing instruction? For whom? In what ways?

To invite students to consider what writing is and to rethink traditional notions of writing, she asked the TFA students to produce nontraditional products, including a multimodal text consisting of images, recorded narration, and other media elements. Class sessions fostered dialogue about their writing and how their own writing practices might influence their teaching.

Through initial writing and class discussion, the TFA English teachers defined writing in typical ways. Some who were more literary-minded saw writing in terms of images painted in words. Others, being more pragmatic, defined writing as communication. Nearly all of them initially conceptualized writing from a traditional view: as words on paper. Only one person mentioned text on screen. After this opening, Kristen shared multiple perspectives of writing from theorists, researchers, and authors, and with each new perspective, she asked the students to revise their original definitions of writing. A prompt to invite students' thinking about the nature of writing in today's digital world came from Joel Malley's *Teaching Writing in the Digital Age*, a video from the NWP website. Initial reactions to Malley's perspective on writing were varied: some of the teacher candidates

embraced his teaching while others questioned the types of multimodal compositions his adolescent students were creating.

Gunther Kress suggests that each new technology brings with it *affordances* and *limitations* that influence the work accomplished via that technology. In order for her students to consider seriously the affordances and limitations of various tools for digital writing, as well as the possibilities for and challenges of bringing digital writing into their middle and high school classrooms, Kristen asked the TFA cohort members to *be* multimodal writers. She included a multimodal writing requirement in their semester portfolios and structured learning experiences to scaffold their writing of these pieces. She shared with them her own first attempt at writing a digital story and facilitated the creation of a wiki page of resources to help them think about digital writing. In short, she attempted to create a community of digital writers who shared ideas and provided feedback outside the walls of the classroom.

When Kristen asked her students to post ideas on the wiki page about how they might meet the multimodal requirement, some revealed their excitement to try new forms of writing, and quite a few admitted that the multimodal writing would also fulfill the requirement to write in an unfamiliar genre. Like many of her peers in Kristen's class, Georgia immediately found value in the task, focusing her plans on the process of creating the multimodal product. She said:

The idea of telling a “personal experience narrative” through both audio and visual stimulus will be both unfamiliar and a self-fulfilling process. As a writer (and teacher) I am trying to spend more time focused on enjoying the process instead of simply expecting a grand product, and photo elements are always pleasing to me.

Uneasiness surfaced as another common feeling among the students; though they were inspired by their exploration with the Digital Is website to create a multimodal product, they did not yet know what the content of that product would be, or as Sally said, what they “would actually DO.” This apprehension sometimes turned to anxiety about the technological aspects of the project. For example, Brigid ended her post with the thought, “Not sure how I will pull that off yet,” indicating a lack of familiarity with the technical components of composing multimodal texts. Through their work during the semester—including in their portfolios and written reflections—as well as through a class discussion with Troy via Skype, students shared their perspectives on digital writing, as well as the tensions they felt.

The TFA students embraced the challenge of the multimodal task, most of them learning the technologies to support the creation of their final

products independently. Kristen provided a few students with technical support, but ultimately, all of them engaged as digital writers, creating multimodal products, sharing them with their community of writers via the wiki, and providing feedback to their peers. As we would expect, just as their writing processes differed when writing in traditional forms, these multimodal writers approached the task in a variety of ways. Their reflections have important implications for our work as teacher educators, and we summarize below three perspectives generally taken by students in the course. Brief accounts from three students—Megan, Sarah, and Ashley—represent these experiences.

### **Perspective 1: Multimodal writing as textual transformation**

When Megan first considered the assignment to create a piece of digital writing, she proposed several ideas, including the creation of a digital story, a podcast, a multimodal poem, and a remix video. In her initial post she commented that the remix “could be time intensive but ultimately really entertaining.” Perhaps her desire to balance her time with her goals for an evocative product pushed her to create a digital story. To accomplish the task, Megan first wrote a traditional narrative, transforming her text with multimedia. This experience helped her to expand her conception of writing, as she notes here:

I really changed my idea of how students are able to communicate via writing while I was doing a multimodal assignment for this class. It ended up being a video of images and being posted on YouTube, but it began by me sitting down and drafting what I wanted to say in the video. I edited and revised this script like I would any other piece of writing, but my product was drastically different from a typical written assignment and I think that my message was much more effectively communicated through this other mode/genre.

As an individual entering the realm of multimodal writing, Megan used the technology to enhance her writing. She did not compose initially with the digital tool, yet saw the process of creating a multimodal text as parallel to, if not entirely the same as, the process of crafting a traditional academic text. Like others adopting this approach—transforming text into multimedia—Megan’s experience builds on her history as a writer and embraces the possibilities of digital writing.

### **Perspective 2: Multimodal writing without textual writing**

Sarah, who viewed the multimodal task as “a challenge to create a worthy experience for an audience using information that is significant

and meaningful to me,” did not follow her traditional process by first brainstorming and writing in a textual medium. Instead, she composed her multimodal piece entirely within VoiceThread, a web-based tool that can incorporate voice, text, image, and video into multimedia compositions. She explained her experience in this manner:

This piece allowed me to see what kind of thought, planning, revision, and creativity goes into creating a piece without writing. It also allowed me to communicate a preserved message with an audience without traditional writing. This revealed to me that writing is no longer the only way to preserve one’s ideas for an audience or for one’s own reflection. Writing is now accompanied by other means of composition.

In this sense, Sarah justified her approach, noting that there are other means to compose than what she had traditionally viewed as writing. However, her core beliefs still informed her thinking:

I believe writing constitutes transforming thoughts into visual words. I did not use writing in my VoiceThread project in any part of the process. I think my piece could have been stronger had I written my thoughts before I began. Still, I created a composition for an audience.

In her view, she did not write only in order to complete the assignment, and, in fact, if she had “written [her] thoughts before [she] began,” she believes she would have created a superior product. Throughout her process, Sarah maintained her initial commitments to both herself and her audience; however, she saw the multimodal task as one that was separate from “writing,” even though she found it valuable.

### **Perspective 3: Multimodal writing as a limited/limiting form of writing**

Although our experience working with teachers shows it to be the case that digital writing is, at the very least, different from traditional writing, and many view it as difficult, we very rarely encounter students who feel it completely limits them. Ashley is one such case, however; frustrated by the technology, she felt inhibited in her expression. She elaborated:

I found my own experience with digital writing this semester to be very frustrating, and I often found my ideas and arguments to be diluted and a little stifled by my use of technology, and it comes from my own biases against technology. . . . I found

it very difficult to make the arguments as I would be able to in my writing in any sort of digital mode. I'm wondering now at the end of the semester how I would use technology in my classroom with writing, taking my own experiences into account.

Interestingly, Ashley did not initially show any trepidation about the multimodal task, and, in fact, she said, "The idea of substituting alternative stimuli for words is something that fascinates me and I am excited about challenging myself to use only sounds or only pictures to express the flow of ideas." However, because Ashley struggled as a writer, she also struggled to see practical applications for incorporating technology (broadly) and multimodal writing (specifically) into her classroom. In this case, forcing Ashley into a digital writing task limited her ability to express herself as a writer, and, in fact, she withdrew somewhat from the community of writers as her frustration level grew.

Considered separately, these three students—as well as their perceptions of the experience and their beliefs about teaching writing—show legitimate and different views about digital writing. Taken together, however, these perspectives still situate digital writing as something "other," something foreign to the students' ideas about what writing is and how it functions. Given the many concerns we voiced above, echoing scholars from literacy studies as well as other fields, we wondered how these views would ultimately affect the TFA teacher candidates as they worked to create a community of writers in their own classrooms. Noting, to use Grabill's term, the "ideological pervasiveness" of certain ideas, as well as the existence of a culture of power, we know that any attempt to change how a subject—especially writing—gets taught in school would be difficult. Even so, the stark reality of the tensions that Kristen's students articulated surprised us. We describe these tensions below.

## **Tensions in Teaching Digital Writing**

If, as we have argued, literacy is born in and of classroom and community discourses, then we as scholars of teacher education and community literacy should be deeply concerned about the tensions evident from these conversations with Kristen's TFA students. Generally, the students in Kristen's course valued the community of writers that had developed through their classroom conversations. To the degree that digital writing enhanced their work, they generally appreciated the opportunity to try their hand at composing with multimedia, and they understood the significance of publishing their work in an open forum. Possibly inspired by the

requirement to write an op-ed for the portfolio, after the course had ended one student even successfully published a piece in an electronic publication of a prominent city newspaper, contributing her informed opinion to a broader conversation on education. As evidenced by their classroom participation and reflections as writers, the students were transformed. Given Kristen's approach driven by NWP ideals, we would expect such reactions from her students.

Still, many of them resisted bringing multimodal composition into their pedagogy. These tensions undermined Kristen's goal to help students understand the transformative power of multimodal writing in community action and civic participation. While Kristen did not explicitly frame the class with a community-literacy or service-learning lens, the principles of TFA combined with Kristen's broader focus on digital writing and social justice would have suggested a stronger buy-in from her students. However, this was not the case, and it changed the focus of our inquiry from a process of how to integrate digital writing in teacher education into a question of why we need to persevere. This resistance surfaced distinctly in the following three tensions as outgrowths of the perspectives noted above and, as we will demonstrate below, show how difficult the task of teaching digital writing as an act of community literacy will likely be.

### **Tension 1: Digital writing is not writing**

As described above, not all of Kristen's students viewed digital writing as *real* writing. Throughout the semester, several students challenged contemporary conceptions of writing. Leroy described his resistance as "a stubborn, conservative clinging to semantics," preferring "to call video production or podcasts as something different than writing." Sally, quoted in the title and introduction of this article as saying, "That's not writing," concisely summarized this resistance. Sally's assertion that attending to visual aspects of text do not constitute writing—and the passion with which she made this judgment—highlights an important tension in teaching: multimodal writing must focus on aesthetics and design, but not at the expense of the thinking, or actual writing, that should ground the work. Sally's experience as a multimodal writer, and in turn with her own students as digital writers, prompted her to question the importance of teaching particular aspects of these kinds of technical skills when they need more experience with writing in general. The kinds of reflection—and resistance—that Kristen's students offered on the nature of writing are critical for us as teacher educators to understand in order to approach the task of digital writing with our pre-certified teachers. Overcoming traditional conceptions of literacy has always been a priority in teaching for social justice, and layering in the complexities of digital writing is a new requirement in contemporary society.

## **Tension 2: Conflicting views of the self**

Some students realized a disconnected or conflicted view between their personal philosophies of writing and their actual classroom practice. In another case, Lyndsey faced an important tension in her teaching, one that asked her to question her purposes in the classroom. Her work as a multimodal writer during the semester revealed to her that her personal view of writing conflicted with her self-view as a teacher of writing. In a self-defined “uh-oh moment” she realized,

I have this stark contrast of myself as a writer and myself as a teacher of writing. They're really different to me. As a writer, I see all these liberal possibilities of what writing means, and yet when I get in front of my 6th graders it turns into a very formulaic, how do they do it [persona].

She viewed this tension between her two selves as a “battle,” saying, “I don’t believe the teacher of writing person I’m giving them right now. It seems very phony to me. It doesn’t make sense.” For example, Lyndsey asked the class during our Skype discussion with Troy at the end of the semester, “Why did I just make a podcast, but when I get in front of my kids why did I have them do a five paragraph essay?” Lyndsey’s struggle between personal writing versus teaching practice reflects the commitment of a young teacher who hopes to transform her classroom, yet feels insecure about doing this work with her students. We note this feeling separately from the outright pressure described in the third tension below. Understanding that there is the potential for disconnect, like understanding the resistance noted above, helps us as teacher educators to work with novice teachers and to help them navigate from their personal views of literacy to action in the classroom. If one of the goals for a writing teacher is to build community within the classroom and provide his or her students with a firm basis for writing outside of the classroom, then exploring the tension between one’s self as a writer and as a teacher of writing is essential.

## **Tension 3: External pressures define classroom practice**

As the many critics of standardized testing have passionately argued, it is clear that TFA students were influenced heavily by outside forces, namely, the pressure of standardized test preparation and the data-driven focus of TFA. The answer to Lyndsey’s question of why there was a disconnect between her writer-self and her teacher-self thus involves more than a personal decision to incorporate digital writing into the curriculum. Instead, external pressures, including the sense of “urgency” imposed by TFA training that impresses upon corps members the need to “catch them [the adolescents whom they teach] up” (Lyndsey, group interview), determine



their instructional decisions. National standards and high-stakes testing suggest to these novice teachers that traditional essays, with a defined thesis and articulated examples, epitomize a standard of “good” writing.

Thus, in Lyndsey’s mind, it makes sense on both the personal and institutional level that “it’s almost an additional thing to do a podcast.” Seeing digital writing as additional, rather than as an essential component of holistic instruction in the secondary English classroom, influenced many of these teachers to draw on a time/cost framework to defend their views that multimodal writing could not, and perhaps should not, be incorporated into their teaching. As Cerise asserted,

One of the big reasons that I feel like I really shouldn’t do that is because I was never asked to do it in college, they don’t ask you to do it on the [state exam], and I feel like a lot of the things we are doing here I really enjoy, but I think that nothing else has caught up to that and so . . . that’s kind of foolish of me to take that time . . . to do something that isn’t frivolous but isn’t necessary either.

Cerise’s comment captures the tension many of her classmates expressed: multimodal writing allowed for important explorations for writers, yet writing instruction in the secondary classroom needed to prepare students for real applications, namely, college writing and standardized tests. At no point did any of Cerise’s classmates suggest to her that writing for social and political action and participation might also constitute a real application.

Though Kristen, throughout the semester, had attempted to refocus the teachers’ views away from the test as a driving force behind instructional practices in the teaching of writing, many clung to the view that test preparation “is necessary” (Georgia, group interview). In his conversation with the group, Troy encouraged the students to think more deeply about the test. He asked, “Why is it that we can only feel free to offer choice and flexibility after [teens] have passed the [state test]?” Leroy presciently indicated that “it’s a structural problem,” explaining,

We’re youngish teachers—it’s hard not to be influenced by our administrations, other teachers, and the inner-city school mentality of “improve our data or die.” And, generally speaking, the flexibility just isn’t there in the mindset of most of those above us. Therefore we feel pressed into rigidity.

This “rigidity” reflects both internal and external conflicts about what it means to write and to be literate in contemporary society. It also presents deep challenges for us as we teach for social justice in a digital world. And,

a sobering fact reminds us of the urgency: TFA students in Kristen's class commit to only two years of teaching in high-needs communities, and after that, statistically, many of them will leave the profession of teaching. If these young teachers do not feel empowered to enact change in their schools immediately, the barriers to transforming the teaching of writing remain high, and literacy practices in our communities will suffer.

## **Conclusion: Teaching Digital Writing as an Act of Social Justice**

In the same volume as Bennett, Rheingold reminds us that adolescents today are “both self-guided and in need of guidance” in their use of technology (99). While those who have access to tools use them functionally, “there’s nothing innate about knowing how to apply their skills to the processes of democracy” (99). Rheingold suggests that teachers embrace the possibilities of today’s participatory culture (Jenkins), but he warns that “‘accountability’ and innovation are often locked into a zero-sum game. Lack of resources, training, and technical support offer significant additional obstacles” (Rheingold 99).

It is evident that communities who have access to tools of technology and adults who can support savvy use of those technologies are primed to contribute to society. Like other scholars and citizens, we fear that communities without these benefits will be left behind; as teacher educators and parents, we know that the teachers in these schools must be the ones to address these needs. That said, they cannot do it alone.

Thus, for those interested in community literacy, we believe that framing the conversation about teaching digital writing as an act of social justice is both timely and necessary. No doubt, similar arguments about all forms of literacy have been made by others, so what we suggest in this conclusion, then, are ideas that are perhaps less profound than they are practical. In other words, while we know that scholars and activists have suggested that teachers engage in classroom inquiry, question why/how curriculum is enacted, and listen carefully to their students and the felt needs their students express, we hope to add one more layer to the discussion. Kristen’s students indicated that the urban teens in their charge “are as behind in their technology as they are in their reading and writing” (Rachael, group interview). As Brigid described, her students cannot use a word processing program:

[They] don’t know how to double space it, don’t know how to center something, don’t know how to right-click and spell check, and those are things that they need to know, especially

if they are going to go to college, but when do I teach that to them? When is there time? And is it my job to teach that to them?

Though the comments of teacher candidates do not surprise us, their willingness to abdicate responsibility for teaching digital skills deeply concerns us. As “digital natives” themselves, we would not expect this to be the case.

Yet, it is.

As we see the effects of the digital divide affecting students’ academic, life, and career skills, we as teacher educators recognize that the perceptions young teachers take into their classrooms may only amplify the effects. If English teachers are committed to teaching for social justice, then they must also be committed to teaching digital writing and the skills that support literacy in multimodal contexts. They must take a social justice stance. If, as Brigid suggested, we “need to start from scratch with [urban teens’] digital literacy,” then teachers must assess the skills of literacy, both digital and traditional, that adolescents bring to the classroom and work to make them literate in both spheres.

The experiences Kristen’s students had as multimodal writers helped many of them to find value in integrating technology into their own writing. For some individuals, like Sarah, the course pushed her to “feel responsible for teaching digital literacy.” It is not enough, however, for teacher education to merely transform beliefs. As teacher educators, we must encourage and facilitate action, helping our students to move beyond passive acceptance of traditional notions of literacy. If our students tell us, as Sally said during course discussion, “I stick to my comfort zone,” then we need to push them out of their comfort zones in meaningful ways.

We began our inquiry by asking *how* we could integrate digital writing into teacher education. The *why*, we thought, was clear: our field has rapidly adopted a perspective that values digital composition, and this kind of writing has the power to transform communities. However, the more we worked with the young teachers in Kristen’s class, we realized a deeper reason for the *why*, one that suggests that developing digital literacy is a right for all individuals. Digital literacy is about more than just words on a page (or, in this case, a screen). In order to participate in their communities and in society at large, teenagers must become digital writers and citizens. As we continued our journey with the TFA corps members, we realized that our beliefs about why digital writing is important did not necessarily echo those of the novice teachers who navigate traditional notions of literacy and political decisions that affect the teaching of writing in their schools. What then do we, as teacher educators who are interested in issues of social justice and digital literacy, take away from this experience?

This study of one teacher education course confirms that Rheingold's warning about guidance and democratic participation must be taken seriously. By examining the perspectives of Kristen's students, we have uncovered three specific areas where more work needs to be done. Though these points are not new insights to those involved in community literacy, we articulate them here as reminders to community leaders, politicians, and educators who can collaborate to empower schools to develop the literacies needed for productive citizenship.

1. Teachers must become digital writers.

Overwhelmingly, Kristen's students admitted that writing in multimodal contexts was unfamiliar to them. This novelty might seem surprising since all of these individuals were in their early to mid-twenties. However, as we have argued, digital writing asks for more than functional uses of technology. It demands critical and rhetorical skills that must be developed. The requirement in their course to write a multimodal text helped Kristen's students to cultivate these skills of digital literacy and to find value in alternate modes of expression. As teacher educators train the current generation of classroom teachers, we must remember that these kinds of tasks have not been commonplace in their education. We must infuse digital writing throughout a program so that novice teachers are introduced to multiple tools and multiple applications of technology in their own learning. English teachers, who are trained as readers and writers in academic contexts, must begin to develop their reading and writing skills in digital venues. They must explore their own processes and find value in the skills that they develop in order to take these practices to their own students. They must understand digital writing as an act of community literacy, one that is grounded in real-world contexts outside of school.

2. Educators must frame digital writing as an issue of social justice.

Grant and Agosto argue that the use of the term social justice in teacher education is both ubiquitous and murky. These authors indicate that teacher education programs need to define their notions of social justice; our collaboration has assisted our understanding of this elusive concept, helping us to define social justice in relation to digital and community literacy. In course discussions, some students indicated that their roles as TFA corps members inhibited their ability to transform classroom practice. They felt pressured to help their students "catch up" and to succeed on state tests. These outside pressures blurred the vision of social justice that inspired many of these students to join the TFA program. Despite the value that Kristen's students may have found in digital writing practices, "catching up" remained an issue of traditional literacy. Digital literacy is not at the heart of what it means to teach in an English Language Arts classroom, at least in

the classrooms where Kristen's students worked, although our professional organizations and leaders in the field suggest that it should be. If the purpose of literacy education is to engage in a participatory democracy, then this inquiry shows barriers to achieving this goal from the very beginning of a teaching career. Namely, young teachers must recognize the needs of the communities in which they teach; they must understand that power and social change can be attained through digital writing and literacy; and they must bridge the divides between the communities that they serve and the community of power. To accomplish these goals, they must claim voices in local and global community discussions about teaching and learning.

3. Action is as important as belief in the teaching of digital writing.

Lyndsey's "uh-oh moment," where she realized a disconnect between her own practice as a writer in the world and the work she asked her middle school students to do in class, stands out to us as an important lesson. Ultimately, our task as teacher educators is to assist young teachers in transforming their classroom practice so that their charges develop the skills needed to participate in society. In all school settings, but particularly in those areas where students do not bring skills of digital literacy to the classroom, our students need to be agents of change. As Grant and Agosto articulate, teachers need to ask, "Are our actions moving us closer to social justice or further away?" (184). For our teacher education programs to be truly successful, they must engage novice teachers to reflect on classroom practice and, more importantly, understand the effects of their teaching on students' literacy practices and the communities in which they live, work, and play.

A number of programs successfully integrate digital writing and citizenship, and perhaps they offer us the most hope for change. While there are certainly more than we can cite here, these few provide us models for how inquiry-based, technology-rich programs have the potential to engage youth in digital citizenship, all the while teaching them reading, writing, and reasoning skills. First, nonprofit educational organizations such as Global Kids and the Digital Youth Network provide out-of-school experiences that focus on communication, media literacy, and problem solving. Second, teachers themselves have initiated networks for students to read, write, and collaborate, and examples include Youth Voices and the Flat Classroom Project. Finally, students themselves continue to create their own communities through countless blogs, discussion forums, fan-fiction sites, and, of course, social networks, although some of these spaces may not invite the kinds of productive behaviors that we would expect of youth as digital citizens. Finding the balance between the types of structured activities and online spaces that students want to participate in while, at the

same time, reaching the goals of a more engaged citizenship is, no doubt, a challenge.

Still, it is possible to invite students—and the teachers who lead them—to think critically and creatively about engaging in digital writing for social action. Given these three themes, and the perceptions that we observed that helped us articulate them, we understand that we, as English teacher educators, have to adjust our focus in order to create change that will ultimately affect the lives of adolescents. We are reminded of the power of writing by one of the teacher candidates, Lyndsey, who noted that we can “change the trajectory of their lives.” However, this change cannot be realized without proper attention to writing in the broadest sense, and digital writing in particular. Digital writing has the potential to expose the culture of power and invite individuals and communities into broader means of expression. To that end, digital writing *is* real writing. Students—and teachers—can only engage in commentary, critique, and other forms of civic participation if they are afforded the full range of occasions to do so, and digital writing provides one such opportunity.

## Endnotes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

## Works Cited

- Bennett, W. Lance. “Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age.” *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. 2007. Print. 1-24.
- Bomer, Randy, and Katherine Bomer. *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*. Heinemann, 2001. Print.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Print.
- Christensen, Linda. *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Rethinking Schools Ltd, 2000. Print.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. “Who Will Speak for the Children; How ‘Teach for America’ Hurts Urban Schools and Students.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 76 (1994): 21-34. Web.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, et al. “Does Teacher Preparation Matter? Evidence about Teacher Certification, Teach for America, and Teacher Effectiveness.” *Education Policy Analysis Archive* 13.42 (2005): 1-51. Web.

- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press, 1995. Print.
- Digital Youth Network. "Digital Youth Network: Empowering Youth Through Media." <http://globalkids.org>. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Flat Classroom Project. "Flat Classroom Project." *Flat Classroom Project*. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Gee, James. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Global Kids. "Global Kids | Home." *Global Kids*. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Grabill, Jeffrey T. *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*. State University of New York Press, 2001. Print.
- Grabill, Jeffrey T., and Troy Hicks. "Multiliteracies Meet Methods: The Case for Digital Writing in English Education." *English Education* 37.4 (2005): 301-11.
- Grant, C. A., and V. Agosto. "Teacher Capacity and Social Justice in Teacher Education." *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions and Changing Contexts*. 3rd ed. Eds. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, D. John McIntyre, and Kelly E. Demers. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group and Association of Teacher Educators. <[http://works.bepress.com/vonzell\\_agosto/3/](http://works.bepress.com/vonzell_agosto/3/)>. 175-200.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.
- Hillocks, George, Jr. *The Testing Trap*. New York: TC Press, 2002. Print.
- International Society for Technology in Education. "The ISTE National Educational Technology Standards (NETS-S) and Performance Indicators for Students." 2007. Web. 21 May 2009.
- Ito, Mizuko, et al. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. The MIT Press, 2009. Print.
- Kajder, Sara. *Adolescents and Digital Literacies: Learning Alongside Our Students*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2010.
- Kempster Group. "ICT Digital Literacy." *Digital Literacy Portal*. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Kress, Gunther. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Labaree, David. "Teach for America and Teacher Ed: Heads They Win, Tails We Lose." *Journal of Teacher Education* 61 (2010): 48-55. Web.
- Laczko-Kerr, Ildiko, and David C. Berliner. "The Effectiveness of 'Teach for America' and Other Under-Certified Teachers on Student Academic Achievement: A Case of Harmful Public Policy." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 10.37 (2002): 1-53. Web.

- Leu, Donald J., Jr., et al. "Toward a Theory of New Literacies Emerging from the Internet and Other Information and Communication Technologies." *Reading Online - New Literacies: Toward a Theory of New Literacies*. 2004. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Lenhart, Amanda, Sousan Arafeh, Aaron Smith, and Alexandra Rankin Macgill. "Writing, Technology, and Teens." *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. Pew Research Center and College Board. Web. 31 January 2012.
- Mahiri, Jabari. "Digital Tools in Urban Schools: Mediating a Remix of Learning." 5 | *A Second Life for Learning*. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Malley, Joel. "Teaching Writing in a Digital Age." *National Writing Project*. Web. 30 June 2011.
- Morrell, Ernest. *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*. Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Miller, sj., and David Kirkland, eds. *Change Matters: Critical Essays on Moving Social Justice Research from Theory to Policy*. Peter Lang, 2010. Print.
- National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. "College Board Advocacy—National Commission on Writing." Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- National Council of Teachers of English. "Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies." 2005. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- . "Writing Now: A Policy Research Brief Produced by the National Council of Teachers of English." 2008. Web. 21 Dec. 2008.
- . "21st Century Literacies: A Policy Research Brief Produced by the National Council of Teachers of English." 2007. Web. 21 Dec 2008.
- National Writing Project. "About NWP." Web. 30 June 2011.
- , Danielle DeVoss, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, and Troy Hicks. *Because Digital Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Online and Multimedia Environments*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2010. Print.
- New London Group, The. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-92. Web.
- Obama, Barack. "State of the Union Address." 2012 State of the Union. Capitol Building. Washington, D.C. 24 Jan. 2012. Address.
- Ohler, Jason. *Digital Community, Digital Citizen*. Corwin Press, 2010. Print.
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills, The. "The Partnership for 21st Century Skills." Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Pew Internet and American Life Project. "Digital Divide | Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project." 5 | *A Second Life for Learning*. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.
- Prensky, Marc. "Prensky - Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants - Part1." Oct. 2001. Web. 21 Dec. 2008.



- Popkewitz, Thomas S. *Struggling for the Soul. The Politics of Schooling and the Construction of the Teacher*. TC Press, 1998. Print.
- Rheingold, Howard. "Using Participatory Media and Public Voice to Encourage Civic Engagement." *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, 2007. 97-118. Print.
- Richardson, Will. *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. 2nd ed. Corwin Press, 2008. Print.
- Tapscott, Don. *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World HC*. McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print.
- Teach for America. "What We Do." Web. 28 June 2011.
- Vygotsky, Lev S. *Thought and Language*. Trans. A. Kozulin. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 1986. Print.
- Winter, Dave, and Sarah Robbins, eds. *Writing Our Communities: Local Learning And Public Culture*. National Council of Teachers, 2005. Print.
- Youth Voices. "Youth Voices." *Youth Voices*. Web. 1 Feb. 2012.

---

Dr. Kristen Hawley Turner is an assistant professor of English education at the Fordham University Graduate School of Education and a Teacher Consultant for the National Writing Project. A former high school English and social studies teacher, she currently works with in-service and preservice teachers to improve literacy practices across content areas. She is passionate about the development of adolescent literacies, both in and out of school, and her research focuses broadly on the intersections between technology and writing.

Dr. Troy Hicks is an associate professor of English at Central Michigan University and focuses his work on the teaching of writing, literacy and technology, and teacher education and professional development. A former middle school teacher, he collaborates with K-12 colleagues and explores how they implement newer literacies in their classrooms. Hicks is director of CMU's Chippewa River Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project, and he frequently conducts professional development workshops related to writing and technology. Also, Hicks is author of *The Digital Writing Workshop* (Heinemann, 2009) and a coauthor of *Because Digital Writing Matters* (Jossey-Bass, 2010). In March 2011, Hicks was honored with CMU's Provost's Award for junior faculty who have demonstrated outstanding achievement in research and creative activity. Most importantly, he is the father of six digital natives and is always learning something new about writing and technology from them.