Toward Disruptive Creation in Digital Literature Instruction

Michael Dean Clark
Azusa Pacific University
mclark@apu.edu

ABSTRACT

Given the multimodal and collaborative nature of digital literature along with the ways it often embodies the theories informing its artistic production, approaches to exploring both the creation and study of the form must abandon legacy pedagogies in favor of disruptive, student-driven course experiences. This work must further include explorations of digital culture, means of production, multimodal literacies, and connections with various definitions of literature ranging from print to auditory to visual forms. To accomplish this, instructors must move from more traditional hierarchical roles to those of facilitator and participant, committing consistently to returning decision-making work to the students.

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Creative writing courses are always challenging in terms of creating a balance between creating conditions in which students find guidance in making craft discoveries as artists, and maintaining spaces for expressive freedom. Additional elements of course design like effective assessment techniques, addressing various levels of writing experience, and negotiating the limitations of time and student learning bandwidth only increase that challenge. Happily, much thought has been given to these issues by instructors of fiction and poetry, and, to a lesser extent, creative nonfiction. However, pedagogical work regarding the burgeoning field of digital literature instruction—books like Montfort's Exploratory Programming for the Arts and Humanities or the collection Creative Writing in the Digital Age that I co-edited—offers a much smaller pool from which to draw inspiration.
In an academic setting, enabling students to engage core elements of digital literature as practitioners—production via digital means, multiple-literacies and code switching, existing practices and expectations, audience dynamics, and collaborative strategies—presents a variety of challenges for instructors and students that quickly render traditional instructional approaches ineffective. Standard workshopping formulations, close reading of text, and traditional notions of genre and media often collapse almost immediately as useful tools in and of themselves, a breakdown requiring considerable restructuring of course format and expectations for everyone involved.

As such, an effective digital literature pedagogy demands a particular commitment to the student experience rather than operating via an instructor-led delivery model. It is important to note that the definition of digital literature with which my classes begin lies somewhere near the intersection of the Electronic Literature Organization’s notions of the genre as “digital born,” that is only capable of achieving its expression in tandem with computation, connected with the Digital Humanities’ imposition of multi-modality as literary space and collaborative authorship as a consistent condition of digital art (Saum-Pascual). This approach requires students to engage in constructing a majority of the course components in shared spaces in order to maximize the performative and theoretical ground they can cover. The more student experience is designed around collaborative processes in a progressive laboratory setting where all elements are clearly connected but fluid in their expression, the more closely aligned the study of digital literature becomes with its production. To this end, assessment of student work must also be collaborative, progressive, process-oriented, and a by-product rather than end goal of production. Put another way, the assessment model must operate in conjunction with the fact that art is reviewed and responded to by an audience rather than graded.

Before illustrating the claims above, a few notes on the theory underpinning my design. Despite the limited nature of texts on teaching digital literature to potential practitioners, there are a few key works I’ve drawn on in building a class that, by nature, creates as much dissonance and discomfort in students as it does creative breakthroughs. In terms of communicating the basic nature of what digital literature is, N. Katherine Hayles’ “Electronic Literature: What Is It?” and “Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality,” as well as selections from Simanowski, Schäfer, and Gendolla’s collection Reading Moving Letters all operate as anchor texts for reconstituting the notion of art in the digital space. In terms of authorship and collaboration, Grusin’s “What is an Electronic Author?” and Fletcher’s “Performing Digital Literature” combine with notions of collaborative and collective literacies as creative practice in Koehler’s “Digitizing Craft,” Bouchardon’s “Digital Literature and the Digital,” and Mirra, Morrell, and Filipiak’s “From Digital Consumption to Digital Invention” to frame an argument for a collaborative approach to digital literature in academic settings. The impact of participatory cultures explored in Hafner, Miller, and Ng’s study, “Creativity and Digital Literacies in English for Specific Purposes” is also useful context in this
regard. All of this connects with more general pedagogical notions of de-centering the instructor’s role, focusing on the intersections between voices, platforms and practices. We press into performance, rather than information retention, as proof of learning.

Achieving these goals, then, is a form of guided chaos informed predominantly by my response to student work and thinking rather than their response to mine. For reference, in my Master’s-level course comprised of students split between writing and literature concentrations, approximately five to seven of the 45 hours of class sessions are driven by presentations from me, the majority of which are delivered in the first three meetings to establish the language and context of digital literature along with the challenges of studying it. The vast majority of time—in and out of class—is driven by four primary disruptions:

- a crowdsourced syllabus;
- a progressive and shared annotated bibliography unique to each term;
- a collaboratively executed, public-facing summative creative digital project made openly accessible online at the end of the term (a process that acts as the students’ culminating experience in the course);
- an individual research project, the terms of which each student negotiates with me.

Taken as a whole, this system generates unique moments I’ve not experienced in other course designs. It opens a host of possibilities and difficult questions no single class could address. Further, the demands of literary forms peculiar to and dependent on digitally networked frameworks reconstitute the experience of creating literature in ways other collaborative courses focused on more traditional genres aren’t generally able to recreate.

In specific terms, I have facilitated two classes utilizing this approach and those groups centered their work in two very different sets of concerns that wound through all the major elements of the course. The first group was most interested in authorship, the challenge of defining digital literature as a genre, and the necessity for multiple literacies when engaging digital works. The second group focused more on nested narratives, metatextuality as aesthetic, and aspects of play that tend to pervade the creation of digital projects (Ensslin). Both groups—which averaged nine participants—had drastically different collective personalities, so class sessions looked very different across terms. Yet, anecdotally, the level of student engagement in both was consistently higher than in many of the traditional workshops and craft courses I’ve taught in the last decade.

This engagement is primarily the result of the disruptive elements of the course, beginning with resisting the traditional instructor-student dynamic in most coursework. This resistance begins with
The cover art of the first group's project, which submerged the notion of individual authorship.

The Afterword page operated as a sort of unveiling of the people involved in the project, a vehicle for returning to the project via hyperlink and document tags based on who had written each piece, and a reiteration of the collaborative nature of the project as a whole.
The opening page of the second group’s project is a Google site inviting people into what appears to be a writer’s investigation into a missing person.

Sometimes, a mystery finds you...

I met Sam by chance, on eBay. It wasn’t the best start. But it was the only start, middle, and end we got. He was a fallen athlete and I am a storyteller. We had agreed to meet but before we had the chance, Sam went missing. It feels like some people are trying to hide the truth and there are smoke and mirrors and lies, but I know that I have the truth, somewhere in the pieces of Sam’s life I’ve found. Of course, I fear what I’ll find. But at this point, having made it so far following so many trails, I hope he’s out there alive. I’ve enlisted the help of experts to help me in my search. Sam was—is—an adventurous spirit with a rough past, so really, he could be anywhere. From Alaska to Utah, I really do think he’s somewhere out there. Any information, comments, insight, anything, is the biggest help. I’m hoping this story can get enough traction to be on the news and this website can gain a wider audience so we can find him. Spread the word and help me find Sam Hamstel.

Introductory text from the project’s first page.
a collaborative syllabus design process that runs the first several weeks of the term while students explore various definitions and expressions of digital literature. Concurrently, they write a general course description, student learning outcomes that should occur by the end of the term, and the specific expectations for the two major class projects using me as a resource. This is how I integrate more general notions of course design and pedagogy often overlooked in graduate education for students who intend to use their degree to teach at either the secondary or postsecondary levels. Interestingly, one group found this anxiety-inducing and turned to adding memes, humorous notes to each other, and questions in the shared document while the other took a more direct path to writing each piece as efficiently as possible. The result was that the other concerns of syllabi such

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### Creative Project [Percentage of Grade?]

This project will be collaborative, sharing a central topic or theme and requiring that your individual contributions interact meaningfully with those of your classmates. So here are the concerns that need tending:

- What is the central theme/topic?
- What overarching construct or form does the project take on?
- How will your contributions interact? How will those interactions be negotiated?
- How will you communicate about your project contributions over the course of the term?
- What forms will be represented in the project?
- What digital platform(s) will be employed to bring all of the pieces of the project together as a single entity?
- Who is the project’s audience?
- How will participants’ contributions be evaluated for the sake of the course grade?
- And the kicker: how will this be art?

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### Critical Project [Percentage of Grade?]

The term critical project should be of an individual focus, as in what you are most interested in regarding your studies/intended use of your MA should drive your research. If you want to write creatively, then focusing on creative digital production would be a good choice. Teaching? How should digital literature be used in the classroom? Literary theory? Track how the fields involved

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in digital literature are shaping how we theorize it. As for the expectations of the project, here are the concerns:

- What form should the final project take? What mode should it be completed in?
- How should it be assessed?
- Could/Should it be a collaborative effort?
- What style guide should govern the written aspects of the project?
- How “long” or comprehensive should it be?
- What is the purpose of the study in general?
- How can/should your classmates contribute to or support your process?
- What should the deadline schedule look like?
- What is Dr. Clark’s role in the process?

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This is a portion of the shared working syllabus. The portions in yellow are all discussed and decided upon by the group as a whole and then written into the syllabus.
as university policies and grade scales were discussed with more than typical interest. The group that experienced more anxiety completed a project more traditionally non-digital in nature than the group that felt more comfortable, though this could be the result of the first group discussing their experience with many of the students who comprised the second section.

Another process that repositions student expectations is a shift in the seminar component of the course. Each three-hour session, for the most part, is broken into three portions: a class discussion of the week’s topic, a short collection of thoughts from me, and an hour or so of work on the collaborative final project. But, even at the graduate level, group discussions often drag and feature the same voices week-to-week. To address this, students create in shared documents an expanding “Classotated” bibliography regarding weekly topics. Each includes a set number of sources from each student with a brief discussion of what each adds to the existing conversation on the topic. Students also comment on each other’s entries, allowing class discussions to run throughout the week and offering insights that help me connect guiding discussion questions with their concerns.

An example of how students offloaded their anxieties about the course in the drafting process for the syllabus.
I can platform the voices of students who are less likely to offer up their thoughts verbally while learning a great deal from how the entire class wrestles with understanding core expectations and practices of digital literature.

The course culminates in a public-facing collaborative creative project conceived, designed, and created by the entire group, myself included, though I only contribute creative work within their framework. The project moves from concept to creation along the lines of those interests that come to the surface over the term. As such, the first group created a text and image-based...
collaborative exploration of being and not being from the Los Angeles region in poetry, prose, and essays stripped of authorial identification. This aligned with the discomfort they expressed in discussing digital authorship and their collective sense of being placed and displaced in both online and physical communities.

This is a piece of a story included in the project that was told in equal thirds on Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. Each component invited outside interaction on the public platforms.
A component of the project that blended fiction and nonfiction in service of denaturalizing the environment that all of the project’s components revolved around. Note the use of the tags for connection with other elements of the project.
The second group opted to build a fictional narrative about a search for a missing person in digital spaces people tend to assume the information they are receiving is factual. The project included “found” artifacts, various characters offering opinions on the missing person, and a nested form leading to the reveal of the project’s fictional nature, all of which aligned with that group’s sensibilities. In both, discussions of craft and forms and the projects’ goals happened organically and by necessity as students built websites, recorded audio files, and researched how to employ various
In an attempt to engage people online in the missing person story, the group seeded “expert” critiques of the primary narratives, each available for download.

Here is how the audience encountered those critiques.
platforms to best develop and shape their work. Most if not all of what the digital tools they used were free and publicly accessible, a constraint that shaped their content as well as its digital presentation, further exploring the key notion of digital literature as being digitally born.

The final product of the course is an individual academic research project. Each student negotiates the particularities of their work with me including form, length or depth, connection to individual interests, and assessment methods employed to evaluate the projects’ effectiveness. This process is the most labor-intensive instructional element, but has led to very interesting work ranging from embodied research on hypertext narratives to the literary potential of digital forms like anime and fan fiction, to a critique of the course itself as an artistic and scholarly endeavor to creating comprehensive, standards-based lesson plans on digital literature for secondary classrooms. In essence, the research work completed by students reinscribes the nature of the course as centered on their explorations with the expectations of an audience waiting at the end of the process.

In total, this course comes close to realizing what I’ve long suspected: education in the 21st century requires disrupting student expectations and facilitating environments centered on the value and necessity of their work while also providing tools for understanding how contexts change rapidly in the digital age without disconnecting completely from prior modes of expression. Put another way, art instructors must disrupt their own pedagogy and get out of the way in order to guide students away from educational paths they’ve already taken with older, text-based forms of literature so they can find their own ways back to their work with what they’ve learned about creating literature in a digital context.

**Works Cited**


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**Biography**

**Michael Dean Clark** is an associate professor of writing at Azusa Pacific University specializing in fiction, literary nonfiction, and digital literature. Co-editor of *Creative Writing in the Digital Age* and *Creative Writing Innovations* (both Bloomsbury Academic), his creative work has appeared most recently in *Bull & Cross, The Other Journal, Pleiades*, and *Angel City Review*. 