



Utilizing Digital Literacy in the Creative Writing Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

The term “digital spaces” sounds like one borrowed from science fiction: a vast and unquantifiable expanse that like the universe is ever expanding; a web of almost endless connections whose pattern can sometimes seem as that of a dream within a dream within a dream; a Borgeesian labyrinth, whose dimensions, not to mention length, breadth, depth and capacity, we can seemingly only hint at in metaphors. Despite their immensity, however, digital spaces in fact provide a valuable opportunity for instructors. Smartphones, and the ever-evolving variety of apps they contain, are a feature of many students’ lives. They are clearly here to stay. This paper has therefore grown from the need to recognize and explore the learning potential of this new educational resource at our fingertips, and so offers a theoretical foundation and historical context to such resources in addition to suggestions of best practices for how these platforms might be utilized based on past successes.

A myriad of recent papers, discussed in detail below, demonstrate that instructors are increasingly experimenting with how social media can be used as an integral part of classes focused on student-led writing. Apps like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube link together diverse groups of global communities, and therefore suggest a common language for communication. Utilizing this common language within activities, assignments, and assessments can lead to using pre-existing knowledge and capabilities to engage with new content and so develop new skills. If we ignore the different opportunities offered by digital iterations of contemporary narrative modes then we will end up removing “significant student knowledge from the learning environment” (Ryan et al. 477). However, notable scholars in the field such as Janelle Adsit have suggested that many students come into the classroom highly engaged in “writing culture” (105), and that therefore digital assignments help students in “adapting to the different expectations and values of different audiences” (109).

The potential for development of new skills may be particularly useful for graduates in the coming years. Social media is focused upon communication, and it is communication skills that Creative Writing courses often foster. If many of today's employers seek articulate and adaptable workers who can meet the demands of changing audiences, then one of the ideal places to offer this might be in a Creative Writing classroom that utilizes digital skills. In other words, it is in the interests of both students and instructors to consider the point where technology and the digital world meet traditional competencies.

Yet these new and vital professional and digital creative skills are too frequently ignored or devalued. Trent Hergenrader has written about how the field of Creative Writing is stuck on the notion that "maintaining culture...is somehow the unique responsibility of print literature", and noted that the 2009 NEA study on reading in the USA left out reading done digitally and actually went so far as to warn against video games, computers, smart phones etc. that encourage digital reading (45). There is a danger, therefore, of educators and professionals dismissing students' own media preferences by privileging print and traditional media. That is something that we ought to be vigilant against; as Stephanie Vanderslice points out, "The future of creative writing is a moving target. If we hope to give our students the tools to succeed and sustain themselves as writers beyond the university, as professors and researchers, we must continually move with it" (604).

For these reasons, this paper will examine a variety of options for making use of social media applications and the ubiquitous smartphone for discussion, evaluation, and creativity inside the Creative Writing classroom, as well as considering potential utilization of current web apps that can extend learning beyond the classroom.

These are not fringe concerns; indeed, this paper responds to the conversation started by books such as Montfort's *Exploratory Programming for the Arts and Humanities* and the chapters in *Creative Writing in the Digital Age* (edited by Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein), and follows Skains in exploring how working on digital platforms can offer students practice in a variety of vital skills, such as "writing; awareness of various film, music, Internet, and game conventions; awareness of cultural signs and references; video, image, and sound manipulation; HTML coding, and potentially much, much more, all in a constantly and rapidly evolving technological environment" (2). Therefore, this paper will provide a survey of current trends in the use of online platforms for examining, teaching, and experimenting with the writing process that are integral to contemporary Creative Writing pedagogies.

METHODOLOGY

The digital spaces created by social media applications provide an invitation to reconsider form, and it is this that allows instructors and students to reconceptualize the process and reception of

writing. Form shapes the way writing is both transmitted and received: a sonnet or haiku will dictate the structure and composition of a poem, while the physical manifestation of a book signals to the reader the structural limits of the story. Consider the seventeen syllables with which Basho must balance between season and emotion, the five iambs in the line that measure out the beat the players must reach. In their own unique ways, Twitter interactions, Instagram narratives, and YouTube storytelling each present a model as distinct and formally challenging as a sonnet or novel. The new constraints of online environments thus offer an opportunity to find new “solutions” that might both engage students and lead to the development of new skills and knowledge. After all, as Michael Dean Clark has argued, it is vital for writing instructors to adapt to teach directly to “classrooms of students who can’t write in cursive but can in code, who have been their own publishers almost as long as they’ve been able to use the language” in order to develop these new literacies and skills in ways that might serve both creative and professional outcomes (“Towards” 61).

Therefore, my starting point for this project was a consideration of how social media applications might lead to a reconsideration of form. Indeed, the project was born out of my role as an instructor rather than as a researcher: I wanted to integrate social media and smartphones into my teaching, but I was not sure where or how to begin. This impetus led me to research various ways of utilizing and applying this technology, but it soon became obvious from the variety of material available that I would need to specify and focus my project upon skills and techniques fundamental to the writing classroom (film, photography, and video game creation, to name but a few, lying outside the course objectives and outcomes of many Creative Writing classes, at least at the undergraduate level). Popular social media apps can be utilized in classroom projects to develop student understanding of narrative, structure, form, voice, authorial intention, and audience reaction. Focusing on these integral areas of study means that these pedagogical approaches can potentially be applied to a variety of classes, from freshman undergraduate introductory courses through to advanced upper-level Creative Writing classes.

I have chosen to focus here solely on YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Each of these three social platforms are currently in frequent use, and each offers potential for experimentation with a range of tools, techniques, and media (including text), and each allows for the creation of projects that can also function as products that students can share and refer back to at the end of the course. However, it should be noted that the following approaches could apply to a variety of social media platforms, even ones which have not been developed yet. My research was thus limited to the three social media platforms that were a) used frequently by the chosen demographic and b) offered possibilities for shareable projects featuring writing that could showcase learning related to narrative, structure, form, voice, authorial intention, or audience reaction. The models chosen and analysed here also had to appeal to a range of different learning styles. David Kolb’s model of learning styles theorizes

that students learn according to four different modes: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualization; and active experimentation. The social media platforms and applications that I discuss below thus include content and activities that potentially fit with one (or more) of these learning modes, in order to engage students with different individual learning styles.

Bronwyn Williams has suggested that given the digital world we live in, it “is imperative...to explore in both innovative and critical ways how to best connect digital technologies with creative writing pedagogy” (243). Therefore, this paper will present approaches I have implemented in my courses (with reference to a range of recent literature on digital creative writing that has inspired these developments) for using three popular social media apps within the contemporary Creative Writing classroom.

TWITTER

The Oulipian process of setting constraints which would deliberately force writing into new directions and new spaces (the most famous example being Georges Perec writing his novel *La Disparition* without once using the letter ‘e’) is instructive here. Jacques Jouet has suggested of this Oulipian writing process that “the constraint is the problem; the text the solution” (4). Digital spaces, with their evolving rules, codes, and constraints, thus offer both practitioners and instructors an opportunity to explore a variety of new “solutions.” In few places is the Oulipian constraint more obvious than on Twitter, where content is now limited to 280 characters. This enforced brevity aligns the form with the contemporaneous rise of flash fiction. In the most satisfying Twitter fiction, this form works best at providing new ways of developing, sustaining, and thinking about character and voice. Among the narrative possibilities celebrated in the Twitter Fiction Festival (@TWfictionfest, which ran up to 2015), for instance, are multiple handles, where one author might utilize several different accounts to interact as different characters to tell a story, and parody accounts where authors tweet as a historical or fictional persona, often in real time. These provide excellent models for discussion, analysis, and experimentation for students within a range of genres and styles.

In addition, the *New Yorker* has noted that

There’s potential on Twitter for wild formal invention. Rather than just fiction tweeted, writers could find narrative in retweets, faves, blocks, and unfollows, and write in not just words but images, GIFs, emoji, and hyperlinks. (Crouch)

This offers many opportunities for experimentation. Consider the collaborative stories that Neil Gaiman has written with fans via Twitter, or the computer-generated “characters” that use sophisticated programming to mimic and parody real speech and so provoke response and engagement.

These are ripe for analysis and editing/rewriting by students within classroom activities. Meanwhile, more traditional Twitter fiction, such as David Mitchell's "The Right Stuff" (a 280-tweet Twitter story that later developed into *Slade House*, the author's most recent novel) demonstrates the power of the sustained first-person narrative to transport and engage. What makes this different from other first-person narratives is the element of accessibility and the low stakes involved in writing online: students "...read Jennifer Egan's short fiction and lament they'll never be good enough to publish in *The New Yorker*; they read her same work as a Twitter novel and think, hey, I can do that, and it will be fun" (Skains 3). Nonetheless, it is important to note that many such stories also suggest the inherent danger of Twitter fiction: namely that it can read as a longer piece arbitrarily chopped into the tiniest of chapters.

As well as functioning as a stand-alone repository for fiction (some key examples being Nick Belardes' Twitter novel *Small Places*, 2008-2010, and Jennifer Egan's "Black Box", a short story told in 606 tweets, 2012, and the innovative work of Teju Cole), Twitter can also be utilized as a key tool in seeding, promotion, development, and audience engagement with a published or forthcoming traditional text. Tweets, for instance, in the voice of a central character can effectively trail and tease a novel to build a readership. It can develop tangential narratives or continue aspects of a story beyond the limits or scope covered in the published text and the unpredictable formal challenge of real-world response, whether via direct in-character conversation with audience or engagement with current news or cultural events. It therefore provides opportunities for writing (and literature) students to reach out and interact with the writers they are studying and/or admire, as well as providing opportunities for small-scale introductory case studies.

Twitter also provides possibilities for student-led classroom activities, in particular proximal guidance, as proposed by Stephen Billett as part of social learning theory. This pedagogical strategy stresses learning through experience, whereby the instructor takes on the role of a "guide" and creates a series of activities that "scaffold" learning before "fading" into the background (Billett). For instance, in my own classes, I have provided some of the examples listed above from Mitchell, Egan, Cole, or Belardes for analysis in the class and led discussion on how these examples of flash fiction (and indeed the parody accounts, in-character accounts, or historical personal accounts) might be developed, revised, or extended to appeal to different audiences. After modeling a classroom analysis and discussion of a piece of online writing (noting its genre, how it hooks readers, and the voice, tone, and literary techniques it employs), I encouraged students to research, find, and share a piece of Twitter flash fiction (easily located via use of specific hashtags such as #flashfiction, #microfiction, #flashfic, or #fanfic) and lead classroom discussion about their piece. In this proximal guidance, I guided the first few practice "teachers," before providing constructive and encouraging feedback. Such activities, if carried out with preparation and sufficient scaffolds,

encourage students to learn through action and experience (Billet).

In addition, Twitter offers students the possibility of studying, engaging with, or even joining a #writingcommunity. This online community has the potential to offer writers at any stage in their writing journey support and recognition (though it is also important to note that Twitter communities can be volatile, with risks of trolling, bullying, and inter-community divisions and argument that have to be borne in mind). Particularly for students who may be writing in specific genres (such as science fiction, young adult, fantasy), these forums may provide opportunities to build a network and to discuss the intricacies and struggles of writing, elicit answers to specific writing-related problems, and experiment in a low-stakes environment. Such communities are also often valuable in sharing calls for publication and work from magazines, small presses, journals and zines, which often do not appear on other mediums. Furthermore, building an online network can be potentially useful in finding mentors, collaborators, readers, subgenre-specific writing groups, and even in pitching to agents and small publishers (via hashtags and online events such as the quarterly #PitMad pitch party run by Pitch Wars in which writers have the length of one tweet – 280 characters – to interest the audience in their latest completed work, which might then be “liked” or engaged with by the editors or agents who take part). Introducing students to the writing communities on Twitter therefore offers one avenue for extending engagement with the business and process of writing beyond the classroom.

Moving up Bloom’s taxonomy from evaluating and analyzing to creating, Twitter offers key lessons in character creation and development in first-person narratives. Twitter is a fertile ground for experimentation in writing, since it is relatively simple to create a new account via a university email address, and then to make the settings private or invisible (so that it can be shared only with others in the class and thus remains relatively safe and protected). Students might then be asked to create a character and tweet as that character (engaging with the other ‘characters’ created in the same class). Unable to utilize description of appearance and attitude, backstory, detailed scene-setting, exposition and, at least at first, dialogue, the writer is forced to carefully consider their use and application of voice. Much demographic information (gender, age, ethnicity, social and marital status, nationality, education level, sexuality, political affiliation, etc.), for instance, can often only be suggested only by inference and clue. In particular, the motivations, contradictions, and traits of the character must be communicated primarily through vocabulary and semantic choices; the mechanics, patterns and rhythms of thought and speech; references and allusions to events, culture, or news; and emotional responses to immediate situations or experience. This means that students, when asked to create a character and tweet in that persona, will have to bypass the usual descriptive markers for a character and put them straight into action by exploring voice and how they might communicate. This in turn suggests opportunities for many more specific lessons on particular

themes, concepts, and styles as per the particular course objectives.

Twitter, therefore, offers potential avenues for analysing experimental writing, reconsidering form, introducing flash fiction, engaging in a community and learning about the business of writing, and expanding lessons on writing character and first-person narrative. All of this digital writing thus encourages “heightened awareness of the act of construction and an output that breaks from the writer’s familiar style...[resulting in] the kind of intentional thinking that is useful in traditional writing” (Reed 143).

INSTAGRAM

Twitter appears to be a natural habitat for writers, both student and professional, since it is a text-driven experience, yet the majority of mobile-driven social media applications, such as Snapchat, Tumblr, Vine, and Pinterest, tend to be image-based. However, once again it is the limitations here that might encourage experimentations with writing styles and forms. In fact, it has been argued that users of sites such as Instagram frequently employ many of the techniques familiar to fiction writers in order to create a persuasive narrative (Tan 1368). Indeed, perhaps the most vital fiction of all for a number of young people (including undergraduate students throughout the world) is that of creating and sustaining the narrative of having an exciting life. The posting of selfies, exotic locations, purchases (particularly fashion and food), cityscapes, social interactions, and artwork, can cumulatively serve to build reputation, increase social capital, reaffirm mutual experience, and generate a tribal sense of belonging (Olsson et al. 2967-2972). In short, like the best creative writing, these narratives fulfill a social function and are also closely entwined with the negotiation of identity.

What this suggests for the practitioner and instructor is that a large number of students are already familiar with the codes, signs, and symbols at play within such applications. Eco states that, “codes provide the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in communicative intercourse” (49) and the use of images to tell a story (or part of one) therefore depends on this familiarity. The social semiotics of visual (and part-visual) communication therefore allows for the constructions of a narrative utilising the “visual grammar” of a collection of images in order to make a series of complex statements and stories (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1). ESL students in particular, who may struggle with complex vocabulary and difficult syntactical movements, are likely to find the visual stimulus provides welcome variety within a text-heavy classroom. Once again, this allows instructors to generate new discussion and analysis of different ways in which writing is generated and received.

Instagram posts typically contain a caption beneath the posted photograph, which often extends, develops, complicates, or elucidates the narrative of the image (as on Twitter, this is frequently appended by a list of hashtags). Students are likely to have experience reading and writing such

descriptive texts, and can be set tasks describing the image, extending the narrative, or adding an argument, as well as analysing the rhetorical situation of such narratives. Such tasks provide opportunities for situated learning, a pedagogical strategy theorised by Lucy Suchman, who suggests that learning occurs in specific cultural and practical contexts, and that the ensuing knowledge cannot therefore be separated from such contexts. Therefore, students need to be engaged in activities that utilize “real-life” contexts. Since the 2018 Pew Research Center study suggested that the majority of 18-24 year olds have experience posting and writing on Instagram on a frequent basis (Smith and Anderson), utilizing this platform for practice-based learning may help show them how writing skills directly relate to the immediate contexts (and indeed interests) of their daily lives. Whether their interests are particular types of literature, music, film, fashion, craft, or (among countless others), it is possible to find an Instagram community (again via hashtags) to fit this interest and thereby potentially appeal to each individual student. According to Suchman’s theory, this real-life context is likely to have a positive effect on engagement, and therefore will aid in specific learning goals. Though this point is relevant to using all social media in the classroom, one specific example of how it can work would be using discussion and analysis of Instagram narratives to provide key lessons on symbolism.

The iconography of a visual narrative relies on the connotations of each element of its composition. Students must consider how the clothes a “character” is wearing, the products she is using, and the places she is shot in, for instance, might represent her socio-economic status, backstory and demographic details, as well as her mood, motivation and conflicts. In addition, students can be exposed to the power of symbolism, as well as being encouraged to experiment with the idea of the objective correlative: an object or event within a narrative that elicits an unspoken emotional or intellectual response from the reader. This object can take center stage in a visual narrative, where everything within the frame might, with repetition and choice placing, take on significance. The idea of the objective correlative was defined by T.S. Eliot, who explained that

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (100-101)

In that sense, the reader participates in the action of the text, with their own emotion brought into play. A visual narrative provides a perfect environment to practice using this literary tool, since this object or event can replace dialogue, stream of consciousness and exposition to demonstrate the “heart” of the story. Moreover, the overlap with poetic and literary construction is clear: repeated motifs might take on a symbolic or cumulative power within a visual text, and guide the reception

of that text. A short exercise here, for example, would be to ask students to construct a short visual narrative about a character without showing her face: by focusing on her handbag, or cat, or phone, or keys. The object would then take on a symbolic power, and this could be compared to how such objects function in other forms of literature (from red wheelbarrows to Mr. Gray's famous portrait). There are opportunities here, therefore, to both study and practice these specific literary techniques, and to compare and contrast with their use in more traditional literary and academic texts.

Models for the classroom here might include Rachel Hulin's Instagram novel, *Hey Harry Hey Matilda*, which appears under the Instagram handle of @heyharryheymatilda, and which was revealed over the course of 200 "pages," presenting a series of framed and stylized images with captions and annotations that serve to link them together into a coherent narrative, an approach mirrored in the account @novelgram which frames itself as *Instagram: A Novel* and also self-reflexively comments on its construction as the story progresses. In other genres, Instagram has most famously been used as a forum for memoir (such as Caroline Calloway's Cambridge-based memoir) and micro-essays (as frequently featured on the *Creative Nonfiction* journal's website), suggesting the versatility of this form for experimentation and study. The appeal here is in the marriage of image and text to complement each other to suggest a deeper thread of connection and, potentially, to also suggest the elisions, contradictions, and differing interpretations between the two representations.

In order to construct their own image-based narrative, students could be encouraged to experiment with storyboarding, a key skill both in terms of outlining longer works (such as novels, novellas, and longer short stories) and in thinking about screenplays and multimedia work. The creation of storyboards and outlines also provides possibilities for kinesthetic learning. Kinesthetic learning techniques focus on getting students to engage in intellectual analysis through physical activities (such as cutting up and rearranging text and images in storyboarding and outlining). Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences proposes a link between kinesthetic intelligence and active learning techniques, which suggests that learning is aided by physical and spatial (as opposed to purely auditory or conceptual) acts. Indeed, James Asher previously theorized that physical actions help students to internalize what they have learned. Providing students with scissors and making them cut up their outlines or storyboards and rearrange sections in groups encourage learning about organization and structure, just as in the revision stage of essay writing cutting up and rearranging paragraphs can help to both identify necessary and unnecessary sections of writing, and to focus students' attention on the process of revision and connection. These activities encourage students to experiment and play around with their writing, and made them break away from entrenched writing patterns and habits which, in some cases, may have been holding them back (while these activities are also easy to replicate on Microsoft Word, Google Docs, and online writing notebooks and hosts). Jerome Bruner theorized that the first stage of the learning cognition process is to make

students “do” what they learn by getting them to take part in active representation. The physical interaction involved in storyboarding and other kinesthetic classroom activities encourage students to make an active representation of a piece of writing, much as a writer might “play” around with the order of sentences or paragraphs on a computer screen during the writing and editing process. Kinesthetic activities can function as low-stakes first step towards students editing and experimenting with their own writing beyond the storyboarding and outlining stages.

A storyboarding planning activity for an Instagram narrative project might therefore provide a solid grounding in the different stages of the writing process, by making explicit the roles of planning, research, outlining, construction, editing and revising as each integral to the success of the narrative. Finally, creating this type of narrative provides a perfect opportunity for group work, something that is often missing from the writing classroom. The ensuing discussion, negotiation and compromise encourage students to think about writing as more as communication with an audience than as a solitary, private or necessarily “personal” activity. The scope of such a project also means that students can work through each stage and create (and indeed publish) their final project well within the time constraints of a regular term or semester. Creating a shareable final product, in the form of an online Instagram narrative (though accounts created for classroom work should be set to private, they can be shared with friends and family later at the user’s discretion), also provides an opportunity for students to take control of the direction and process of their own learning. This is a key tenet of what Watts and Bentley call self-determination, where classroom activities encourage students to take an active role in their own learning. Creating a timely and relevant product that can be shared via a medium which many of their peers are likely to use thus provides a clear incentive for this.

Therefore, Instagram can be used in the Creative Writing classroom for a range of potential lessons. From examining the social function of narrative, to analyzing codes, signs and rhetorical situations, students’ prior knowledge of this vastly popular platform can be used to the advantage of the course. The multiple models freely available on Instagram (which are continually increasing and thus go far beyond the examples listed above) can help with a range of specific lessons, from descriptive writing and extending arguments to using situated learning to consider symbolism and other literary techniques. Meanwhile, extended projects such as storyboarding and working in groups to plan, create and share an Instagram narrative are vital collaborative activities for the writing classroom, since “Writing is almost always a collaborative process. It requires editors, designers, producers, co-writers, and most importantly, it requires an audience” (Lemerond 10). They also provide a wealth of opportunities for kinesthetic, self-determined, conceptual, and collaborative learning that can generate final shareable products.

YOUTUBE

Image rarely stands alone, however. Much imagery in digital spaces tends to be used with captions or in an illustrative capacity to complement text or themes. Indeed, digital spaces are increasingly being used to host transmedia stories: namely, storytelling that uses a variety of media platforms to construct a coherent and complimentary narrative. The aim is that each of the individual pieces (such as image, podcast, YouTube film, and annotated Tumblr) should be able to stand alone and work as a satisfying single piece, but that added together, the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts. One multi-billion-dollar example would be the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where the same characters exist in different narratives across movies, television series, comics and graphic novels, fanfiction, artwork, podcasts, video games, and tie-ins, and where the realized world in which these characters operate is extended and developed with each subsequent iteration and narrative. On a smaller (and far cheaper) scale, personal storytelling that extends across image-based sites, video sites such as YouTube, and podcasts might all complement, broaden, and expand enjoyment of (as well as immersion in) these narratives.

Much of the pedagogical focus of writing for digital spaces has been on such transmedia narratives, with particular emphasis placed on what is frequently referred to as “digital storytelling”: namely, an online narrative that involves a mixture of digital media, most commonly including video, text, imagery, soundtrack, and vocals. One example assignment is the tale from family history, where students research by finding old photographs and interviewing family members, before collating these into a storyboarded and edited YouTube film that might include edited selections of each of these elements along with voiceover, dramatic reconstruction or reading, or music. The construction of a digital story means that students learn through practice and experiment, and engage in research, scripting, design, production/postproduction, and presentation all within a single task (Chung 33-50). Digital storytelling encourages an approach to writing that emphasises how to balance being flexible, universal, interactive, and community-minded (Park and Seo 4125-28), while also improving students’ skills at critical thinking, media literacy, and composition (Gakhar and Thompson 610). Furthermore, by the end of the course, digital storytelling once again enlarges the potential of the writing classroom by allowing for the creation and production of a viable and realistic published artifact – something which is difficult to achieve in a fourteen-week class on writing a novel, for instance.

Student engagement in such projects also offers an opportunity for what has been termed POGIL, or Process-Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning (Moog and Spencer). POGIL is a research-based instructional methodology that stresses the fact that knowledge is best transferred through students’ active participation in learning activities. Students are given access to materials and encouraged to explore, experiment, then apply what they have learned in different scenarios with the instructor

watching (and assisting when problems arise) rather than guiding. New ideas, terms, and lessons “are introduced at a point when the student has already constructed her own understanding of the concept” (Moog and Spencer 4), meaning learning is consolidated both through and after activities. Any classroom utilizing social media platforms for student projects could potentially benefit from a POGIL approach, since experimenting with creating content for YouTube will indirectly lead to student-groups considering key ideas such as structure, audience and perspective, which can be analysed in post-activity reflection.

Furthermore, many of these activities and guided-learning techniques transcend the confines of the Creative Writing classroom. Digital storytelling can be used in a range of classrooms to encourage and develop news skills such as digital literacy, global literacy, technological literacy, visual literacy, as well as the ability to research, evaluate and integrate information into students’ own work (Robin 220). Meanwhile, any research project utilizing audio podcasts, video, or image-based narrative could provide an effective teaching and assessment strategy to motivate, engage, and develop the creative abilities of students with learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), those for whom English is not their native language, or those who might struggle with traditional literacies.

In a different way, the opportunities offered by narratives that are already at play within digital spaces can provide a clear framework for student writing. Gerber and Price suggest that the content of YouTube and vlogging videos themselves provide a number of potential lessons for the writing classroom. These include using the walkthrough guide as a key practice of expository writing (thinking about audience requirements, context, genre rules, descriptive techniques, and explication); vlogging as a way into character-driven writing in a consistent voice (suggesting doing so in the voice of a character from a game); and the use of existing worlds developed from popular games to develop fanfiction (which might take the form of lyrics, poems, short stories utilizing pre-existing characters in new scenarios, plot developments, screenplays or video critiques) as an entry into creative writing (Gerber and Price 72). YouTube allows students to create and share videos among the class and so can function as performance practice, as well as a way into analyzing how writing for stage, screen and other diverse platforms may differ from other forms of creative writing.

Using YouTube also allows students to practice a range of “modalities, as outlined by the New London School: written language, oral language, visual representation, gestural representation, spatial representation, tactile representation, and the representation of the self (Cope and Kalantzis 12). For instance, by making a poetry film, students have to consider not only the textual elements of poetry, but also how visuals, lighting, scenes, voice and performance play vital roles in the reception and effect of such texts. More importantly, such tasks emphasize how interconnected and important such communication skills are in today’s world. Indeed, Amy Letter emphasises the importance of marrying research skills with creative production in the digital age, “inspiring

students to synthesize skills they already have but previously regarded as unrelated (e.g., narrative and design, code and poetry, social networking and storytelling)” (188). Even the work of filming, editing and presenting themselves performing a poem or short story (particularly relevant in this time of increased remote learning due to the current pandemic) forces students to adapt their current skills to different formats and situations, which is a key outcome of many Creative Writing pedagogies.

YouTube might thus be potentially utilized as a flexible pedagogical tool within a range of situations and classrooms.

LIMITATIONS

However, any consideration of digital spaces within the Creative Writing classroom must acknowledge potential issues arising from their use. The creation of digital products, for instance, present a range of issues for instructors in terms of rubrics and assessment (particularly for the transmedia narratives that might encompass both image-based, video, audio, and textual work), and also relies on instructors being proficient with the latest digital platforms and having the technological skills to both implement and examine work that straddles a range of disciplines and medias. Making matters more difficult is that fact that when faced with such a vast array of options in terms of form, content, and structure, students may end up mimicking pre-existing models that they have already seen. Students without much technological literacy or exposure are also likely to need a large amount of support in such projects. In addition, questions remain about the nature of dissemination, democratization and copyright of the digital works generated by such projects, while “educators using any web-based form of instruction must be concerned about equal access for all learners, taking into consideration an individual’s socioeconomic background and learning needs” (Dreon, Kerper and Landis 9). There is undoubtedly a digital divide in terms of student access to and previous knowledge of online tools, and so it is important not to assume a digital literacy but to scaffold all tasks, projects and activities appropriately, paying attention to the fact that many students “are not entering into our digital writing classrooms already armed with the skills they need to create digital fiction, despite our expectations of them as ‘digital natives’” (Skains 4). Students may have a limited understanding of how many digital applications work, and so the onus is on the instructor to demonstrate many of their rules and possibilities in order to highlight the autonomy that such technologies can offer students.

This leads to a broader point: creating such activities and scaffolding can require much time and effort. The platforms are constantly changing and evolving, as are the models which instructors might use for classroom analysis. The instructor must invest the time in becoming familiar with the necessary technologies and applications, and must experiment with these themselves before asking

the students to do the same. However, it is my firm belief that such work is not only rewarding, but vital. Creative Writing pedagogy has to adapt to the times, and as Michael Dean Clark notes, “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” (“Marketable” 13). Such disruption – namely, following Dean Clark, moving from traditional pedagogies to student-driven course experiences (1) – takes a large amount of planning and preparation.

Meanwhile, it is also vital to keep up-to-date with the ever-changing policies of the hosting companies mentioned in this paper, particularly in terms of whether the student or the platform owns the posted content. Frequently, it is the company and not the creator. At the time of writing, for instance, Instagram “has a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sub-licensable, worldwide license to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate, and create derivative works of users’ content” (Hack). This is certainly worth considering, as are the actions and ethics of the parent companies of such platforms, particularly in terms of data usage and political influence.

However, bearing these important caveats in mind, it should be noted that there is great cross-curriculum potential for using social media platforms within the higher education classroom. Though I have focused primarily on lessons, skills, techniques, and assignments that can be applied in my own Creative Writing courses, there are clear parallels with activities which could be used in many different levels of study, particularly for lessons on audience, voice, style and forms of communication, or those involving activities that focus on place, setting, identity, and modes of interaction. Meanwhile, combining a variety of contemporary pedagogical tools and theories (from POGIL and kinesthetic learning through to digital storytelling and social learning theory) with students’ previous digital knowledge might, with experimentation, be successfully adapted across writing courses and classrooms in order to engage and challenge new generations of learners.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered just a few of the examples of possibilities that might utilize digital literacies in the Creative Writing classroom; the vast and ever-expanding nature of the Internet and social media platforms means that countless other iterations have not been mentioned, and indeed that many more will undoubtedly continue to appear in unpredictable forms in the future. What is necessary now, then, is more research that might contribute to original knowledge on the learning potential of these new educational resources. Whatever forms such technologies and platforms

might take, their use in the classroom should be encouraged, since writing across digital platforms has a vast array of benefits, among them that it “allows students of different backgrounds, cultures, linguistic levels, areas of interest, fandoms, genre preferences, and communication styles to compose texts in a wide variety of methods – a multiplicity that we as instructors could never strictly delineate and define” (Skains 3). It is surely one of the duties of Creative Writing instructors to encourage such a multiplicity and adaptation of creativity. Future papers on original ways to use digital resources and platforms to disrupt traditional Creative Writing pedagogies are therefore vital.

Nonetheless, what is striking is that each one of the examples of writing in digital spaces mentioned in this article takes the student and instructor back to the central issues of storytelling: namely, the power and potential of voice, character and plotting. Regardless of the technical, formal, or cross-platform innovations, traditional literary tools (particularly the three-act structure leading from conflict to resolution, the centrality of character development and transformation, and the specific conventions of the chosen genre) remain vital to the digital narrative. This seems an important lesson for student writers, and indeed their instructors, as they navigate digital spaces; these new forms and Oulipian constraints offer the chance to reconceptualise the process, transmission and reception of writing, in order to do what the best of writers have been doing for millennia, and communicate in a satisfying, original, and cogent way.

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