What Do Introductory Students Learn by Creating Shareable Digital Artifacts?

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Abstract: *In this critical reflection, an instructor of Introduction to Creative Writing discusses student learning from the study and creation of "sharable digital artifacts"—for example poem films and Instagram poetry. This practice benefits both non-majors and majors as students make gains in specific skills of revision, metaphor making, and image creation. Further, students make gains in threshold concepts of creative writing through the activity of transferring their knowledge across creative writing genres.*

Keywords: *poem films, digital humanities, instagram poetry, Introduction to Creative Writing, transfer of learning*

It may seem strange to assign first-year students in an Introductory class to read, discuss, and play on the borders of a discipline. After all, it makes sense to crawl first, then walk; to learn the rules before earning the license to break them. Yet creating "sharable digital artifacts"—poem films, Instagram poetry, and other hybrid multi-modal creations—can lead to deep learning, strengthening students' abilities to transfer underlying concepts of the writing process, engage in revision, and think about audiences and purposes in creating art. Such goals may seem lofty for Introductory courses; students will need to spend multiple semesters (and writers devote years) to fully gain and refine those skills. Yet, we know from work on threshold concepts (Adler-Kassner and Wardle), and the very purpose of breadth requirements within a liberal education, that students should swim in the real waters of a discipline, encountering and grappling with the fundamentals of a field and its distinct ways of thinking and knowing. Sharable Digital Artifact (SDA) projects, especially when students are given opportunity to transfer existing creative work into these popular and multi-modal forms, can be particularly powerful for learning in an Introductory creative writing class.

I teach at an open-access two-year branch campus of a state university system. Like many students across the nation, most of my first and second-year students are not majors but enter the course with a wide variety of prior experience and interest. That's one thing that makes the class so interesting to teach (because we are all pressed to articulate our baseline assumptions), if at the same time it challenges instructors to help students see the connections from the class to their futures and dreams. In fact, I first hit upon sharable digital artifact creation to highlight the transferability of the skills we were learning with my nonmajors in mind. By drawing a line from our learning to the digital productions students see every day, I hoped to underscore the overall usefulness and applicability of the close reading, writing process, and feedback-giving skills students were learning. Yet, as I have assigned these projects (and later in this essay I will describe and reflect on student learning and my own attempt more specifically), I have come to understand their value for engaging students in the deep concepts of the course.

First, assigning work across multiple genres is rich for learning in itself. Writing across genres is a tenet of a transfer-based curriculum in first-year composition. Students who practice transferring skills from one genre to another within a class are better able to transfer skills from the class after it is over. While some composition instructors assign students to practice transfer by writing in different academic genres, others, such as Howard Tinberg, broaden that range further. Tinberg assigns composition students to read and write celebrity profiles and obituaries, Ted Talks and YouTube videos, pairing this writing for everyday genres with a vocabulary for discussing writing and rhetoric and with student reflection assignments in which they build their own "theories of writing." Tinberg owns that he is training students for their futures, including for the workplace, by building a course around the skills of transfer. In comparison, while many of us conceive of Introduction to Creative Writing as a multi-genre course—as does the AWP in its "Recommendations for Teaching of Creative Writing to Undergraduates"—we likely build courses only around the big four (fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, drama), or even only a few of those four, thinking in terms of laying a foundation for different genre tracks of the major. In doing that, we aren't thinking of what it takes to transfer learning, necessarily, nor thinking of what more broad skills all students can transfer from our courses. In fact the AWP, while acknowledging the usefulness of writing and close reading for all students, only defends a "multi-genre" course in terms of service to those who will go on in the discipline—not in terms of the rich learning from genre transfer for all students. Others in our field do more than ignore the nonmajors in our courses; they even see danger in designing curricula for students taking the class for general studies. Julie Babcock warns the AWP recommendations go too far in trading Gen Ed service for the development of the next generation of writers by emphasizing "craft" (which Babcock sees as a reductive packaging of creative writing knowledge) at the expense of humanistic exploration of why we create art.

Yet asking students to create sharable digital artifacts, especially within a multi-genre curriculum, can serve both a liberal education curriculum and majors. It can serve students

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seeking skills they can transfer and engage all students deeply in why humans make art. Creating sharable digital artifacts—in their varied, multimodal forms—highlights the mutability of all genres. Further, SDAs invite students to create art they could readily share within the spaces they actually live—online—and, potentially, for the fellow humans with whom they interact outside of class. This marries acquisition of skills with experiential learning of art making, and in a way that is motivating.

Some creative writing instructors, such as Saul B. Lemerond, already assign Introductory students to create "multimodal" projects, and for the goals of 1) meeting Generation Z students where they live and 2) for transfer, of both practical, technical skills (the rudiments of making a podcast) and 3) to shore understanding of fundamental course concepts. Lemerond notes that when students write across genres, "understanding one leads to a better fundamental understanding of the others." Further, Lemerond cites Zuzana Husárová, who asks students to create multimodal creative writing projects because of the way digital technologies, with multisensory possibilities, can unlock student creativity. Husárova notes the "playful and participatory potential" of digital projects. For all these reasons—meeting students where they live, providing a structure to help students understand fundamental concepts, and to help them tap into the sensory experience of creation—these projects are rich for Introductory courses. I usually assign these as a final project. I see active engagement as students work as artists, transferring their learned skills to a contemporary sphere they recognize. Students leave the course by practicing hanging their new learning on a familiar-to-them peg.

First, I will share the details of what I've been assigning. After, I'll describe the learning I've seen in student projects and reflect on creating my own SDA.

SHARABLE DIGITAL ARTIFACTS ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW

- Due near the end of the semester and workshopped on an all-class discussion board or in classroom discussion. (Multiple SDAs can be discussed quickly in one period.)

- Preparation: We view poem films by Zachary Schomburg and spoken-word poet Hollie McNish, as well as poem films by Motionpoems Inc, and picture-poems by the artist Kenneth Patchen and Instagram poetry (Instapoems) by Rupi Kaur and others. In choosing what to present I look for variety and for what will help me discuss combining and juxtaposing of media elements. For example, Schomburg's images and music often work abstractly with the text that appears on screen. For contrast, I'll find a Motionpoems example including an author's voice for audio and with more direct illustration or even animation. I choose Kaur because a few students will have heard of her, and even own her books. I show other Instagram poets in addition to Kaur and have even complicated our discussion of Instapoetry by giving examples from the fictional Instapoet Raven S. (See Lloyd's 2019 article

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"I Faked My Way as an Instagram Poet…"). I also show past student examples to illustrate that it's not technical prowess or polish that we're after.

- Technology: Students have used iMovie, Adobe Spark (free for students on my campus, and easy to use), Prezi, Tik Tok, PowerPoints, audio-only recordings, or they have hand created paintings or collages and snapped photos or recorded on their phones. Most college libraries have cameras and recording devices for use or check out. Extra credit is offered for students who share their projects early, including discussion of how they did it.

- Getting started: Students are asked to create their SDAs by radically revising something else they've already created during the semester, for example, taking one line of a poem to create an Instagram poem. Text needs to be their own and ideally images too. This helps by giving students material with which to start and enacts revision for genre.

- Copyright and use: This project invites discussion of free and fair use—a thing I realized I did not talk about much in prior creative writing courses, but certainly is an important concept for students who will go on in writing and for any students who will continue to view or post text, images or sound on the web, or to consider questions of ethical use. I provide a link to a creative commons database of online images artists have given permission to use: https://ccsearch.creativecommons.org. Students may use stock images or sound clips from Adobe or other programs, but I note that if viewers recognize it as stock, it can affect their experience of the piece.

- Accessibility: Preliminary discussion of the professional pieces and how readers access and experience them often leads organically to discussion of this important topic—another my previous classes didn't always address. In some ways, SDAs can enhance accessibility. In other ways, SDAs pose barriers for access that must be addressed. In a recent semester when a student who is blind was in class, I required all students to include visual descriptions of any images in their Insta-poems or poem films—and then couldn't believe I had never done that before. Describing the visual aspects of pieces guided us toward a more inclusive classroom and prompted students to reflect more deeply on the images they and others had chosen; just what do they show? The blind student created an audio-only piece, one which was particularly compelling with the content she paired. Further research into learning from student creation of multimodal projects should seek to describe how these projects might help us to create inclusive classrooms, and for students with disabilities, neurodiverse learners, or students of color —or the ways in which they might create barriers. In some ways, that the projects elevate contemporary and popular modes of communication alongside those seen as traditional and academic serves an inclusive classroom by upending power structures,

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allowing us to question who gets to define art. So too does the fact that SDAs can be posted easily by anyone and distributed for free.

- Like with all work that is workshopped in the class, students can revise, edit, and use their SDAs in their final portfolios. I encourage them to share their SDAs on their own social media too.

STUDENT LEARNING

The projects students submit vary widely—and so do the emphases of their learning. Last semester a student revised a poem into a series of three Tik Toks (narrating the poem over filmed images) and another paired a reading of a creative nonfiction essay with a video of her hands using charcoal to draw a woman, who took shape as the essay did. Students have created collages, read poems against a backdrop of an original dance (performed by friends on a darkened football field with flashlights), revised narratives into hypertext Prezis, made novel trailers, and many students produce Instagram poems or poem films, which is perhaps the thing I emphasize in my instructions. (I'd next like to learn more about creating podcasts with the free Audacity, as Lemerond does, or incorporate more examples from sonic poets, as Hazel Smith does.)

Some student SDA projects lend themselves to learning about editing, in addition to learning to revise for genre. Students must use scalpels to select only the most worthy line or phrase from an existing work to fit the space of an Instapoem, and workshop discussions often focus on how the line could be further cut or words rearranged for consideration of how they fall across the image, or for line breaks and rhythm, now more dramatic since the container space is so small. I have observed students who have previously run out of things to say in workshop of an entire poem go back and forth in conversation about a single word or spacing choice in an Instapoem.

Multimodal activities, including making Instagram poems, also invite students to make decisions about combinations, prompting more thinking for Introductory students about metaphor. One student blurred a photo of a beach to go with the feeling he wanted to capture of someone's senses being blurred from joy or desire. The student who made the charcoal drawing reflected on the texture of that charcoal, the quality of her voice reading her essay, and the mood she wanted to create. I also talk with students about creating juxtapositions between elements; some "matchy-matchy" combinations of images and words can become cartoonish or reductive, I warn, and images and sound can do more than merely illustrate text. After discussions of layering and juxtaposition, one student combined a line of a poem about "blaring" holiday music with an image of a car with bright red taillights in retreat against a snowy evening. Another student created a poem film by selecting one strand from a braided essay that contained statements about anxiety and combining each statement with a different original photo of a sunrise or sunset; the

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moments of the poem film alternate between hopefulness and despair because of the interplay of text and rising and setting sun images.

As an ending project in the course, the sharable digital artifacts seem to give students a chance to return to beginning discussions of how to read and interpret creative writing, particularly lyric modes. Many Introductory students find it a new experience to look past the trees of denotative meaning (and the task of parsing that meaning) for the forest of connotative affect, and effect for the reader. Student discussion of sharable digital artifacts, though, suggests to me that they can find a way through these multimodal works to a beginning understanding of words on the page as works of art in themselves: to the idea of the aesthetic performance of writing. These are threshold concepts in an Introductory class—key underpinnings of the discipline over which students must pass to achieve other understanding and skill. Certainly, more advanced students can go deeper; Hazel Smith describes a master's level class focused on the relationship between sound and literary texts and observes that "Thinking about musical meaning can give students a completely new way of considering literary meaning" as well as that "studying musical meaning helps students to understand the more abstract nonrepresentational aspects of writing" (62). But in my experience, Introductory students also benefit from the vehicles of sound and musical meaning on their way to learning to read poetry. The specific skill practice—in revision, metaphor, reading for lyricism and abstract meaning— comes in addition to the learning from transfer between genres.

There have been challenges in assigning these projects. I started asking students to produce a set of three Instagram poems (rather than just one) to make the option more equal to the poem film option and to give them more opportunity to demonstrate the choices they were making. Student projects do reflect widely different amounts of time and effort, and sometimes feel hard to grade for that. When assessing, I look back to my directions to remind myself that some students have gone way above and beyond, not that others slacked. The students who select more elaborate projects seem happy with the reward of the project itself as well as the tech skills they chose to pick up. I worried at first about providing support for the various technology tools. I am not a digital whiz, and my best advice is to google for an answer or find a how to on YouTube. Yet that is often enough for us to get by and helps me model that the technology is not the point (as well as show how to meet technical challenges by googling). I allow for low-tech options, even those that involve scissors, old magazines, and glue. I emphasize that a student can describe any fancy effects they'd wanted to achieve (but couldn't) in their author's notes.

It is also true that some of the final projects, particularly the Instagram poems, are not always great. In some cases, it's due to the writer's lack of visual design knowledge; more often it's for the same reasons early poems can often be eyeballed as such: they engage in cliché or lack surprise. (For an example, picture an Instagram poem that combines text about hard work

and achievement with a familiar photo of a football field.) Like with other projects in class, this is where author's notes and peer critique take the learning beyond the work itself. Yet, thinking about past projects that were not stand-outs or seemed challenging to assess helps me articulate a complicating thing about these SDA's, particularly those that use the photos or the voice of the writer. These pieces can become highly personal to the writer, which is a strength for the writer learning to feel the power and purpose of artistic expression, but can interfere with one goal of the class: helping students move from a developmental understanding—as identified by Greg Light—of creative writing as solely individual expression and toward a more expert understanding of the role of readers in co-creation of a text's meaning. Some student SDAs, particularly the Instagram poems, hold meaning for the writer that the average viewer can't access, not if we don't know the photo is of Grandma's rocking chair or the dog the one Dad found in the snow. Yet we face these questions when we workshop confessional poems or intimate creative nonfiction essays; in a caring workshop, they give us an opportunity to explore this problem of achieving both personal expression and meaning for an audience.

To explore these multimodal genres more, I gave myself the challenge of creating my own poem film. I wanted to test my theories of what students were learning from the experience and strengthen my abilities to help them. While I can speak to students about writing fiction because of short stories I've written, in truth I assigned SDAs for several semesters before having tried to create my own—one I'd actually put my name on and share on my social media. What would I learn about these projects and the transfer of writing skills from trying?

The first thing I did was flout all my own advice. I picked too long of a poem, a multi-page, personal poem about spending time with my young son during the coronavirus lockdown. I had a cache of pictures that I wanted to pair with the poem (at risk of being "matchy-matchy"). I also selected a tool with which I had little familiarity—iMovie—though I had been hankering for a reason to play with it. Yet even as I knew I'd advise a student against such a long poem and against so many representational pictures, I began working this way anyway. This helped me remember that what's most important in any creative project is what draws us.

Making the poem film quickly engaged me—and in many of the fundamental skills: revision, making metaphors, imagining my audience and the final presentation within this new genre. To record the audio for the poem, I had to read it out loud (a step I might have skipped on my own) and that helped me to cut it down, deleting whole stanzas and lines. As I paired the images with the text, I found interesting tension in switching between combining and juxtaposing pictures with the lines—practicing my skills of making metaphors and of playing with pattern and repetition. I also paused to look up more non-representational images on the creative commons site, hoping to create more lyrical moments in the narrative poem. I did grapple with new technology, though an eight-minute YouTube video on iMovie got me up and running. As Husárova said, I found the experience of the technology "playful and participatory" (n. pag.); the four

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hours I spent combining my existing poem and existing images using the new-to-me-technology felt like solving an interesting puzzle. I even ran into a fair use issue: after my first draft, I proudly screened the three-minute poem film for my seven-year-old who promptly declared he did not want me to use a video sequence of him dancing. The video was my favorite part, but yes, reader, I cut it and reworked those seconds.

There were advantages for me as an experienced writer, certainly. I wasn't being graded and didn't have a deadline. I knew already that creating should feel like a mix of making decisions, taking chances, and accepting accidents. I also knew even when I was "done" that it was okay if it wasn't perfect. Yet, working with the technology seemed to reinforce all that process knowledge; my work could be saved and a choice made or reverted with the touch of a button. I felt a freedom in being new to the technology that I didn't expect perfection from myself. It has become my goal when working with students to reinforce the idea that we are playing with the tech tools, as we should be playing as artists.

A difference for me, though, was that I was transferring my knowledge into a new-to-me medium. I am much less familiar with Instagram posts and short videos than I am with traditional genres of creative writing. Inversely, these are the media and forms that feel more familiar to many of my students, more than the sonnets, braided essays, and flash fiction we also read—though it is often new to students to see SDA forms as art. In a way, assigning these projects at the end of the course, with students' new knowledge from the course behind them, is to end by putting the reins in their hands and turning them toward a pasture they already know, allowing them to demonstrate their new skills from a place of power and expertise. Combining new and prior knowledges makes for impactful learning and, with reflection on that combination, creates potential for real transfer of learning, and to multiple next contexts.

On a final note, I had expected when I first assigned these SDAs that students would enjoy posting their creations on their personal social media channels—that this project would invoke a real audience, have real stakes, and therefore be motivating. I enjoyed the instant likes and comments from friends and family when I posted my poem film. Further, as Light identified, Introductory students do need to make progress in understanding audiences as receivers, partners in making meaning. Interestingly, however, not many of my students report that they do share their SDAs on their personal social media, though they seem to enjoy sharing them with each other in class. This may be related to how they conceive of their personal social media, their own identities in those spaces, and how they see our creative writing class—as, indeed, a class, part of their school lives. One student told me that their friends and family would be confused by an Instapoem on their page. Yet, even if the projects don't connect most of my students with real-world audiences in reality, students do seem to recognize these forms and genres as real and are able to conceive of how others might view them within a public context, which I see in their workshop feedback to one another and reflective author's notes. In this way, perhaps more so

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than their writing in other genres, these projects do help students imagine real audiences on the receiving end of writing.

As teachers who are committed to the liberal educations of all our students, who strive for inclusive classrooms that engage, motivate, and set students up to transfer their learning, we should look newly at writing across genres in Introductory Creative Writing classrooms, and at the power of writing in new, hybrid, and multimodal genres. Rather than seeing these forms as outliers, as ones only expert experimenters might explore, we should see their potential as a familiar playground for neophyte majors and nonmajors alike. Overall, creating sharable digital artifacts in the Introductory classroom, particularly in combination with writing in other genres, connects students to the roots of making and sharing art.

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