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What Story Do We Tell? Exploring Multiple Literacies in the English Language Arts Classroom

The author encourages a closer look at different modes of digital composition.

The third principle under "Wisconsin Foundations for English Language Arts" in the [*Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts*](#) (2011) states that "literacy is an evolving concept, and becoming literate is a lifelong learning process" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, p. 23). Based on new and changing spaces for the creation and consumption of new literacies, this principle is integral to understanding teaching and learning. While some teachers view the use of technology in the classroom as a catalyst for anxiety, others cannot live without it. In either case, the National Council for Teachers of English 2014 Media Literacy Award winner Denise Grandits reminds us of some basic principles for exploring and using technology in the classroom while honoring what we hold dear as English language arts educators:

> No new literacies person would say stop reading books

or writing essays, but students are involved in other literacies...and if we're really preparing our students to be college and career ready, we have to explore many literacies with them ... There are things you can do in a movie that you can't do on a piece of paper and things you can do on a piece of paper that you can't do in a movie.

If we return to the basic premise of teaching writing based on purpose, task, and audience, Grandits's words appropriately connect what we teach to how we teach it, embedded in a philosophy of continued exploration and growth for both our students and ourselves. As spaces for writing expand beyond the classroom walls, it is important to work through how the same purpose for writing can be represented in multiple ways depending on the task.

Thinking through audience, task, and purpose for writing a range of print and digital texts can help us work through what, how, and why we expect students to write. As a method to think through these issues, I appreciate Burke's (2008) analogy to the *Carpenter's Manifesto* as an approach to teaching writing through the following steps: beginning, visualizing, gathering, constructing, finishing, and presenting. Much like the process a carpenter experiences in any building task, a writer goes through similar format. The beginning establishes the need to build, that is, write about a subject requiring decisions about form, style, and length. Visualizing allows time for exemplars from others to open the act of writing in a particular form. During gathering, writers locate materials such as ideas and evidence in order to set a solid foundation, which leads to constructing, or writing. There is so much that takes place while constructing a piece of writing, which speaks to the recursive nature of the writing process. Depending upon the writing task, finishing a piece will reflect expectations for what a "finished" piece actually looks and sounds like, and how teachers and students go about accomplishing that task. Finally, the presentation stage of a writing process is the sharing of the writing with the intended audience.

When thinking through writing as a building process, we can examine how changing a writing task within the narrative genre can also transform the experience for both the author and audience. In order to do this, I turn to two writing tasks to investigate how the use of technology alters our experiences as writers within the same genre. The first task is a narrative writing prompt that may be used for a journal entry or narrative essay. The prompt was procured from *The New York Times* Learning Network blog (2014), which lists [500 Prompts for Narrative and Personal Writing](#) along with a mentor text for each one. The second writing task is creating a narrative through the website [*Cowbird: A Witness to Life*,](#) which allows writers to upload images and audio within their narrative as another way to tell a story.

A familiar space for many English language arts teachers is the journal prompt. This task requires an understanding of personal narrative and clear expectations for audience, particularly if the audience is larger than the teacher. Students may not need as much support for writing to a prompt but may need help narrowing ideas or envisioning structure. The prompt from *The New York Times* Learning Network list about overcoming adversity will serve as an example to work through audience, task, and purpose in a paper-based writing task. The

prompt, "When have you ever failed at something? What happened as a result?" is to be answered in a student journal, and based on the nature of a writing journal, the audience will most likely be the teacher with the task of crafting a page or two due on a predetermined date. The purpose for the journal might serve as an opening to a unit related to themes of adversity or perseverance. The teacher could participate with students by sharing and discovering personal failures and outcomes while learning about students and building community.

Working through Burke's analogy of writing and the *Carpenter's Manifesto*, the process may look and sound something like this: in the beginning, the writer understands the form, style, and length based on the teacher's explanation of the journal prompt, but the writer must make a decision about the need to write about which particular time he or she failed at something. Visualizing depends upon the student population. A teacher may need to talk through or write alongside students to provide an exemplar of what is expected for those who need such support. During gathering, students collect their ideas and details based on their perceptions of what actually happened when they did fail and what the outcomes were. This might require some talking or further visualizing, bringing

those pieces together. When ready, students will begin constructing their written piece in the journal. Some students will write almost straight through, while others will stop and start, moving recursively through the writing process until the finished product emerges. Presentation depends on what is expected of a "finished" journal and what expectations are regarding students sharing or talking about their writing in class.

Now let's take the same premise of the narrative writing prompt but switch the task for the purpose of exploring a writing process through the use of another technology. The writing task is now to create a narrative through *Cowbird* as a way to capture a story through text, image, and if appropriate, audio. There is a built-in audience for writers based on the nature of the website as a hub for sharing stories from all over the world. Here, many parts of Burke's analogy to the *Carpenter's Manifesto* are similar to the first journal-based narrative writing prompt, with some key shifts in thinking and exploration for writers. Using a website like *Cowbird* affords broader availability of mentor texts which speaks to the notion of visualizing in Burke's analogy. Writers can read, view, and listen to others' narratives as a path toward visualizing how their own stories will take shape. Teachers may want to spend some time with students to explore how different

stories come together. For example, one author published a narrative called ["Comfort Paradigm"](#) as a way to capture story through images and text. In a series of four clicks, we experience the author's story through text combined with visuals representing a change in tone and state of being that eventually becomes a mantra in his life during times of stress.

After spending time with some of the stories as exemplars, teachers can work through gathering necessary ideas, details, and evidence for a story that would be published on the site. Students will need time to decide what visuals to incorporate as a representation or important part of their story, and whether or not audio is integral to its telling. Purposeful talk through such issues is an important component of the gathering process.

When ready, students can write their stories after making an account through the website. While writing, they will think through the visual and audio components to the story and how they are all represented. Assuming students will publish their stories online, having a sense of that audience could drive the need for revision during and after writing. Again, there should be discussion of what makes a "finished" piece and what should be accomplished beforehand. The final step, presenting, is publishing the story

on the site, thus participating within a community of thousands of other writers.

We know that many of our students are already engaged in the use of technology for various purposes, including sharing stories. These stories may come in the form of a quick video, a blog post, or even 140 characters. By exploring and drawing on similar modes for writing and representation in the writing classroom, we can enhance not only the quality of what students produce digitally for academic purposes, but what they produce for print-based academic purposes as well (Beach, 2012). The key is not mastering every new piece of technology or application, but to explore some of them to gain a sense of the writing possibilities available.

References

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