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Writing at Scale: Composition MOOCs and Digital Writing Communities

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Introduction

“Digital writing is political. It democratizes the act of writing in the sense that it both allows open participation in the creation of cultural content and redefines public writing as work that anyone—not just professional writers or academics—can do. From blogs to mashups to Twitter, to the greatest extent ever, we have the tools and the opportunity to write our own story, rather than suffering someone else to write it for us.”

- Tanya Sasser, “Digital Writing as Handicraft”

In 2006, as part of his job as the chair of a new online English program at the Community Colleges of Colorado Online (CCCO), Sean was tasked with designing first-year composition courses within the WebCT learning management system (LMS). LMSs were closed systems, “walled gardens,” in which learning was meant to take place through written or video lectures, discussion fora, and assignments (usually completed individually—group work is not easy inside most LMS frameworks). In other words, the design of the online classroom prohibited any but the least innovative writing pedagogies. And over time, some of those pedagogical tools, like the online discussion board, became as much a staple of online education as the lecture had been in the traditional classroom. While CCCO and other college systems around the country felt that offering distance education online was itself an innovation, the implementation of pedagogically limited learning management systems kept online courses from interacting with their own medium: the Web. This also meant that students—whose lives were increasingly being influenced by and represented on the Internet—were asked to leave behind their online lives at the very moment when they might most benefit from embodying them.

The conundrum Sean faced was that online courses simply do not operate the same as on-ground courses: the audience is not the same, the level of interaction and spontaneity in discussion cannot be replicated, and, most importantly, writing on the Web (to which we also refer as “digital writing”) is different from writing on paper. Despite the efforts made by word processing programs to mimic the page on a screen, writing online is more permeable, more malleable, more spreadable than analog writing with a pen, pencil, typewriter, and paper—indeed, even different from writing inside a contained word processing system.

When we write for the Web, we do not write for print. This seems axiomatic, rational and easy to accept. However, the case of online writing *instruction* is not so easily deduced, or reduced. The implications for writing on the Web, specifically as opposed to writing for print, are various and sometimes surprising. And if we embrace the notion that the medium does not just dictate the message but also the method, we discover the multitude of ways in which digital writing and digital composition differ from, challenge, and undo more traditional writing. In this chapter, we argue that digital writing is unique and hasn’t been adequately theorized, and that we must embrace the novelty of web-based writing in our composition pedagogies.

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To some extent, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have attempted to respond to this novelty, integrating unique forms of peer review, reflection, and grading, and encouraging the use of blogging and social networks as part of their exploration of digital writing. Although massive in scale and experimental in nature, MOOCs have remained largely linear, reflecting online learning as it's been developed over the last decade—courses within learning management systems (LMSs) which attempt to reconstruct classroom learning online.

A quick note about MOOCs here. MOOCs represent a fundamental shift in the scale, economic model, political economy, and pedagogy of the college classroom. As a one-size-fits-all reaction to the changing landscape of learning, though, the MOOC is a massive failure of imagination; however, as a model that might inspire new kinds of learning that can happen in all sorts of containers, the MOOC is a likeable beast. In November 2012, we chose to create a massive *digital* writing course precisely because successful MOOCs can force instructors to take a more student-driven (distinct from “student-centered”) approach to learning, fostering emergent thinking in both student learning and course design. Siva Vaidhyanathan writes in “What’s the Matter with MOOCs?”,

Real education happens only by failing, changing, challenging, and adjusting. All of those gerunds apply to teachers as well as students. No person is an “educator,” because education is not something one person does to another. Education is an imprecise process, a dance, and a collaborative experience.

We sought to create a MOOC specifically designed to get at the “imprecise process” of digital writing. We called it Digital Writing Month (DigiWriMo), a slightly madcap, loosely designed MOOC, which not only sought to embrace novelty and reimagine writing in digital environments, but also worked to transform the process of online learning. It was not meant to be a linear, organized learning process, but rather one that was distributed across the web—nodally, rhizomatically, rampantly.

In this chapter, we situate our philosophy behind Digital Writing Month within the context of composition pedagogy and its response (or resistance to) changes in writing technologies. After a brief review of the dynamic writing field, we discuss how we developed the course and balanced expectations with openness. Finally, we explore questions raised during and because of our experiences with DigiWriMo, highlighting the ways in which a flexible, month-long MOOC teaches us about working with digital texts in all our classes.

Toward a New Theory of Writing

Composition pedagogy largely transitioned away from the process movement in the 1990s, shortly before digital composition became the standard for writing, and web-based publication took hold. With the field’s attention fixed on important issues of genre, transfer, and multimodality, we may be inadvertently missing what Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her 2004 keynote address at the CCCC, referred to as “a moment” (297). She recognized a turning point in composition education, one created by a growing rift between student experience and student instruction. Many of the conventions taught in a composition classroom occur naturally, and without explicit instruction, on the Web. When many of our students can adeptly navigate a

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political issue across online news reports, televised talk show interviews, up-to-the-moment Twitter reactions, and even meme images circulated on Facebook, our efforts to have students use a single genre in response to any rhetorical situation seems artificially separated from reality. Yancey asserts that today, we understand communication to involve multiple interrelated genres, “circulating across and around rhetorical situations both inside and outside school” (308). Writing instruction from the twentieth century does not adequately prepare students for the writing processes of the twenty-first. Yancey rightly asserts that the content of modern composition courses requires “a new vocabulary, a new set of practices, and a new set of outcomes” (308). We believe the rhetoric and composition field has yet to compensate for that new set of practices in its pedagogies. Until we develop a theory of digital writing practices, composition courses will occupy an untenable divide between theory-based content derived from print and practical application in digital spaces.

Early online composition courses leaned toward the content, rather than the application, side of this divide. Despite Yancey’s call for a new set of outcomes for composition, early experiments in open online composition courses, including those that Sean designed for his online English program, as well as the first composition MOOCs, rarely focused on open online composition practices—practices Yancey called “the *content* of composition” (308, emphasis in original). While the writing process has changed over the past few decades, becoming more and more networked (while also being more individuated), those same decades have not seen an equal upheaval in composition pedagogical practices. The first group of composition MOOCs featured remarkably familiar course content: Duke University emphasized foundational skills like summary, analysis, argumentation, and support; the Ohio State University emphasized rhetorical thinking, rhetorical arguing, and rhetorical researching; while Georgia Tech emphasized critical thinking, rhetoric, and process (Tham 9). Similarly, the FYC courses at CCCO were yet based in the paradigm of the five-paragraph essay, and traditional conventions of process such as brainstorming, outlining, writing, editing, and rewriting. Rather than using the Web to teach about writing on the Web, this kind of course merely transfers writing for print into an online environment. Even though the courses took place on the Web, they still emphasized a writing process firmly rooted in the traditions of print. They did not venture far from standard compositional practices, despite being conducted within a medium in which writers are reinventing writing.

How we write changed with the advent of the word processor. *Where* we write changed with the advent of the Web. *Why* we write changed with the advent of blogging and again with the advent of social media. The writing process no longer stops with “getting published.” Not only has that goal been rendered commonplace with the countless platforms for blogging, microblogging, and status-updating, but online publication begins the responsive process built into Web 2.0 technologies. Once writing has been published to the Web, it becomes available for re-use and re-mix, commentary and community. Kenneth Goldsmith writes of the joy inherent in writing through re-use, which “delivers emotion obliquely and unpredictably, with sentiments expressed as a result of the writing process rather than by authorial intention.” Teaching writing in the age of re-use, therefore, asks that we move our focus from authorial intention onto a writing process that we may not yet entirely understand.

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Digital writing—writing that anticipates re-use, re-mixing, remediation—alters how we think about words, their purposes, and their functions in a world of readers, writers, consumers, producers. Digital writing allows our society to shape, or at least examine, that world through the lens of written discourse. In *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, Lawrence Lessig asserts the value of a public that thinks through writing.

Blogs are valuable because they give millions the opportunity to express their ideas in writing. And with a practice of writing comes a certain important integrity. A culture filled with bloggers thinks differently about politics or public affairs, if only because more have been forced through the discipline of showing in writing why A leads to B. (92)

Today's students learn the critical thinking involved in effective writing through social engagement. They see their writing coexist with others'; and analytic tools that count page hits, "likes," retweets, and re-blogs show the amount of influence and distribution garnered by a piece of writing. Success can be measured in terms of interaction with a quantifiable audience: how many times did a text get read, shared, or responded to? In effect, our students must become sensitive to what Jim Ridolfo has dubbed "rhetorical velocity." Rather than merely writers of simple static texts, students must "anticipate and strategize future third-party remixing of their compositions as part of a larger and complex rhetorical strategy that plays out across physical and digital spaces" (DeVoss and Ridolfo).

By writing digitally, students get instant and as-it-happens feedback directly from their intended audience, rather than feedback from an individual teacher delayed by a week or more. Web-based writing brings with it new feedback mechanisms that have not been formally integrated into composition pedagogies. Feedback from the online audience eclipses instructor feedback—and even instructor grading—as more relevant, more immediate, and more meaningful. With Web-based writing, because the audience can use and respond to student texts, students gain both a real, interactive audience as well as real-time feedback on their writing's effectiveness.

But the benefits of near-instantaneous feedback come with a challenge. Now there is no value to our writing except as it is made useful. What we write online gains purpose from what readers do with what we say—not just how our writing is interpreted, but how it is rebuilt, refabricated, repurposed—and we must write accordingly. And we must learn to teach writing accordingly by helping students develop tools for writing in ways that allow for and encourage networked ideals of re-use. With digital writing, every text begins at meaninglessness until it finds harbor and use elsewhere, becoming meaningful only by association. Writing for the Web considers the inherent value — indeed, the intention — of virality in the medium. Today, "going viral" acts as a lure to motivate online writers to produce more, publicize better, or be wittier. Indeed, if writers create digital content while ignorant of the need for distributable texts online, they miss an essential point of writing digitally: web-based texts belong to the Web once they are published.

Institutions of learning did not invent digital writing; rather, it has evolved on its own as a response to social media and online personal networks. It has been further facilitated by creative design and technology (such as Google Docs, GitHub, Markdown, and other Web-aware writing tools) frequently used by non-academics, and in many cases, people who call

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themselves “coders,” not writers. Quite simply, the tools we use for writing change the ways we write and share our work. Even as discussions of “intellectual property” proliferate and fear of student plagiarism runs rampant, the notion of singular authorship is losing traction. Phenomena like fan fiction have re-opened the way to writing that is borrowing, writing that is repurposing, writing that is “uncreative” but deeply original. These innovations have occurred largely outside the purview of the composition or writing classroom, and have taught those students—usually before they come through the door—an entirely different set of writing rules and processes than those they’ll learn in class.

The disconnect between technological innovation and changes in writing instruction have not gone unnoticed. Yancey observes that “the members of the writing public have learned ... to write, to think together, to organize, and to act ... largely without *our* instruction” (301). Today’s students choose from among myriad tools to construct their diverse texts, and their composing practices may be quite different from traditional academic composition instruction. The meaning of *composition* has expanded, and the writing process has changed, from the influence of online technologies. Our instruction should change to reflect the new composing possibilities. We cannot avoid teaching writing technologies any more than students can avoid using them.

In “Teaching in a Culture of Writing and Technology,” Chris M. Anson writes, “our key roles—as those who create opportunities and contexts for students to write and who provide expert, principled response to that writing—must change in the present communications and information revolution.” (275). We must teach new writing technologies to help students make sense of their processes in the modern environment. And we must be prepared to let them teach us (and each other) new skills, new tools, and new literacies that draw from or build on those technologies. The Conference on College Composition and Communication issued its Position Statement for Online Writing, suggesting that “an online writing course should focus on writing and not on technology orientation or teaching students how to use learning and other technologies.” This position risks decontextualizing writing by suggesting that writing and the tools of writing can be treated separately. Admittedly, the Position Statement argues that “students [should] focus on learning composition and not on learning technological platforms or software,” placing the emphasis on writing while acknowledging that the technological is involved. But teachers need to avoid creating classrooms that are disconnected from the digital. It is a mistake to think students will not try to employ digital tools to write, and equally erroneous to believe that the digital—housed in the pockets of every student—can disappear when learners walk from the hallway to their seat in class. When we teach students to write, we teach them a process inherently infused with technology. Digital writing relies on technologies that cannot be separated from their creative processes, and therefore, teaching composition without the technologies involved equates to teaching half a subject.

To be clear, digital writing, as invented by those who do it, is as much a process informed by the voices of the writers (working communally, collaboratively, or convergently) as it is by the design of the technology within which that writing takes place. Christina Haas warns that ignoring the influence of technology on our writing process “discourages any examination of how technology shapes discourse and how it, in turn, is shaped by discourse” (22). Effective composition

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instruction helps students see how language works within a discourse; we must therefore include an examination of writing technology not just in our pedagogies but also in our course content. Because writing and technology are inseparable, efforts to teach one without the other are not merely reckless but frankly impossible. When students learned to use word processors to write their texts, they had to learn how to use cut/copy/paste features; otherwise, they wrote as they would with a typewriter... and therefore missed the point. Likewise, skills appropriate for print-minded texts bear no resemblance to those used to write in pixels. Certainly, there are comparisons that could be made between the changes of the digital age and those of the industrial age, but conflating these moments obfuscates the very distinctive effect each new tool has on our writing products and processes.

As its associated technologies have become more complex, the act of writing has transformed. One might say that today, more than ever, technology is technique. The machine determines the method, if you will, and if we wish to help our students improve the method, the machine must also be investigated, even (or especially) as those machines change. To pretend otherwise risks obsolescence. We need a pedagogical approach to composition that accommodates, examines, and uses the affordances of Web-based writing.

Dreaming up Digital Writing Month

Digital Writing Month, a one-month massive open online course exploring digital writing and literacy, began with a phone call. Brainstorming ways to bring attention to his newly birthed English and Digital Humanities program, Jesse called Sean and said, "I want to do something like NaNoWriMo [National Novel Writing Month]." Run by the San Francisco non-profit Office of Letters and Light, NaNoWriMo is a kind of hybrid proto-MOOC. The event is held over the thirty days of November, during which writers each produce a 50,000-word novel. As the Web site for the event says, the event is "a fun, seat-of-your-pants approach to novel writing.... Valuing enthusiasm and perseverance over painstaking craft, NaNoWriMo is ... for everyone who has thought fleetingly about writing a novel but has been scared away by the time and effort involved." Jesse wanted something that would encourage people to play, create, compose, write, and craft—something that would get the attention of young bloggers, of middle-aged Internet novices, of educators and technologists.

Digital Writing Month set two goals for participants in its inaugural year. The first: finish the month with 50,000 digital words. The second: figure out what digital writing is—how it's made, and what it consists of. We described the event as "a (somewhat) insane month-long writing challenge, a wild ride through the world of digital writing, wherein those daring enough to participate will wield keyboard and cursor to create 50,000 words of digital writing in the thirty short days of November." Our approach to the event was to break open the boundaries of writing, beyond the concerns of genre and form, and to enlist people into an experiment designed to discover what digital writing is through the enacting of the same. We didn't look for participants to write novels, essays, short stories, or poems, but made all of these—along with Facebook updates, tweets, blog posts, text messages, webcomics, and more—valid applications of digital writing. We envisioned a project that had only a marginal understanding of

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itself, one which, through the active participation and content-generation of its writers, would discover what it was trying to accomplish. We believed that digital writing was still an entirely new pedagogical (if not creative) field, and we knew the only way to uncover digital writing was to do digital writing, *en masse*.

We made a choice to house the course on the open Internet, resisting the urge to build a course within an LMS, and instead working to create a community of writers using a Wordpress blog, a Twitter hashtag, and a Disqus forum. We encouraged writers to come up with creative ways to manage their word count, and to share their methods with the digital writing community. We also did not limit the expression of “writing” in new forms: video, animation, comic strips, images made from words, and more. Because our proposal was that digital writing is something yet undiscovered, we could hardly frame the course around composition and writing in a printed context. Web-based writing confuses the distinction between what is writing and what is composition because these things don’t live separately on the Web.

Before long, a conversation opened up about the nature and meaning of “digital words.” With a requirement to reach 50,000 words, participants began to ask, “What is a digital word?” “What counts as writing?” Some proposed that reblogging, retweeting, sharing, or even “liking” already made digital words could count because those words move into a new context were new words. Tanya Sasser wrote in “Defining Digital Writing”,

For some, the challenge of Digital Writing Month is not so much the word count as it is figuring out what exactly digital writing is (and is not). Do emails count? What about retweets? What about images and videos? How do you “count” those? What about all of the words we delete during the process of drafting and revising? Do those count even though they’re no longer “there”? ... Which digital “words” don’t count? ... Where do ideas end and authorship begin?

In other words, the word count goal was not necessarily literal. In fact, several participants realized that they would reach the 50,000-word goal quickly, and without effort, if they included all the words they cast into the Internet through their various social networks, blogs, e-mails, and more. The word “count” became a lens through which to consider the nature of digital writing, the constancy of it, and the idea of authorship. Additionally, the flexibility with which participants handled word count allowed those who normally balk at writing, or say they simply “aren’t writers”, to see that writing was not only commonplace in their lives, but always and everywhere a potentially creative act.

Sean posted “The Specter of the Author” during the second week of the course, responding to participants’ thoughts about the new nature of authorship. There, he says,

Write what you know, and the world will write upon it. The world will tweet it, “like” it, share it, parse it, abbreviate it, duplicate it, splice it, excerpt it. And each new iteration and variation on your text becomes less your text and more the text of the world. Your testament, which you so carefully crafted and which your mother said was so you, becomes ever more recrafted as it is dispersed; and, ever more applied to others, it begins to resemble that text their mothers would recognize as so them. But of course that text is only them as long as it hovers in suspense, unredistributed, unrepurposed,

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unshared, unreauthored.

Or, as Barthes much more succinctly (but without the Internet) said: “The true locus of writing is reading” (147). The participants of DigiWriMo soon discovered that their work gained new value after it was redone by others; and each of them was able to make famous their compatriots by redoing their work. It became clear that collaboration and communal writing, then, is not simply the product of a cooperative effort, an essay or story written by many hands, but writing subjected to the act of sharing, and thus rewritten and rewritten.

A Flurry of Cursors

The work of real-stakes writing depends on collaboration, a complex transaction that demands more than just the simple transfer of words and ideas from a writer to a page and then to a reader. In the most productive collaborations, our ideas live coterminous on the page with the ideas of our sources and our peers. In the days leading up to DigiWriMo, we worked more to build a strong community of participants than we did to assemble content for them to consume. Digital Writing Month began with a midnight launch, gathering participants from all around the world into a grand experiment, one that invited discovery and play. Twitter participants counted down to the start, a mob excitedly refreshing the course website as the countdown reached zero. From the outset, participants in the event were asked to “conspire, collaborate, co-author, cooperate, collude, and even compete” to reach their 50,000-word goal.

In DigiWriMo, we worked together, co-composing with a large group of learners, investigating the ways that collaborative writing can be used to support learner-centered composition pedagogy. What we encountered in our experiments was a series of brilliant, chaotic but also coordinated, efforts as group members dynamically delegated the various tasks that go into the creation of an essay, story, or poem. We organized the writing of collective poems with hundreds of participants, where each author could only contribute a single word. We coordinated an effort that had approximately 100 people co-author a 42,000 word novel in a single day. The goal of these experiments was less about product and more about process—about learning to navigate mass collaboration within a digital environment. Collaborative writing, whether between a group of 3 or hundreds, is a dance that depends on careful orchestration, flexibility, a meta-level consideration of process, and a commitment to play.

The novel in a day experiment ran from midnight to midnight on November 3, 2012. Fifty-five authors signed their names to the final document, which remains openly accessible on the Web. (We offered access to the event and document without requiring sign-in, so the number of additional anonymous participants is difficult to estimate.) The task itself was proclaimed with a simple setup: “1 Day. 1 Novel. 50,000 words. A Throng of Authors.” The guidelines, co-authored by participants inside a Google Doc on the previous day, included: writing is synchronous, not sequential; writers should defer to text already in the document, rather than wildly deleting; writers shouldn’t worry about how or where their words “fit”; and writers should pick a section of the novel and revel in the “flurry of cursors”. The group decided that the novel would be a series of interconnecting vignettes, featuring an appearance (in some cases a mere cameo) by the DigiWriMo mascot, Digi the Duck. Some writers expressed trepidation at the start, and many

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participants chose to compose in a calmer environment outside the Google Doc, cutting and pasting a vignette wholesale into the novel. As we all got more and more comfortable with each other, though, the collaborations became increasingly intimate, with dozens of cursors flitting across the document.

One of the participants, Elizabeth Switaj, writes in her blog post about the experience, “The closer the collaboration, the more likely you are to create something greater than you could have made independently.” Switaj writes about the initial hesitation many contributors felt to collaborate at the sentence level. What we observed was an increased intermingling of cursors as the day proceeded and community formed around the task. We also noticed that vignettes composed outside the document were less likely to inspire continued work from other participants once added to the novel. The most successful vignettes were the ones where authors deliberately created gaps and prompts for other writers inside their paragraphs and even inside their sentences. Many vignettes offered subtle second-order commentary on the experiment itself, which demonstrated a consideration of digital writing and how collaborative work happens on the Web.

Some examples from three vignettes follow, each reflecting in some way on the nature of digital writing. The first vignette reads almost like a set of instructions for writers working inside the document, asking contributors to skip gleefully from one vignette to another—to not let cursors get stuck.

One doesn't often consider how cobblestones might feel under the feet of a duck, but walking through the square was more difficult than Digi imagined it would be. Bricks get hot, and there are no shoes for webbed feet. One simply must walk quickly, skipping from puddle to puddle, as ducks do. And he did. He did it very well indeed.

Even this early in the co-authored document, writers were consciously and subtly working with one another to encourage collaboration. As well, by suggesting that writers and character skip “from puddle to puddle, as ducks do”, the authors of this small bit urge those who will follow toward experimentation and play.

The counting of words is central to NaNoWriMo. In DigiWriMo, the discussions were less about reporting counted words and more about asking how, why, and what we count. Within digital writing, counting words is a red herring, leading to a slew of quandaries like how to count images, code, co-authored words, etc. The following excerpt is from the third vignette, which was co-composed by at least six authors who seem to be addressing this problem of counting words:

56. 60. 64. 70. Counting the cobblestones like small square letters in a giant heap of words. Words that burn holes in pockets. Words that ask for sentences. And paragraphs. And small ducks to help arrange them into stories. And poems. And novels. “Novels like this one,” said the boy, looking down at the lines written across the cobblestones below his feet. 74. That's the number he liked best.

We embarked on a challenge to write 50,000 words in a month, but nearly wrote that number in a single day. In composing his post for DigiWriMo, “On the Horrors and Pleasures of Counting Words,” Jesse counted the words from every e-mail and tweet he composed in October: 32,366

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words sent by e-mail and 10,134 words sent by tweet. In November, Chris counted the 1,168 words he tweeted on election night alone, not to mention the 8,043 words he wrote on a single day in his responses to student writing. In the wake of the sort of transformations at work in the technological age, it seems sensible to turn the sheer magnitude of digital writing to our advantage. Our pedagogies must embrace the various alternate modes of communication in which students (and we) are proving so prolific.

Finally, this excerpt from the fourth vignette illustrates the understanding we came to during the course that the goal of Digital Writing Month was not to make words but to connect people:

She stopped, still staring out at the square. “People...they’re like places. You can’t tell things from the surface. Events happen, and pass, and sometimes don’t leave a mark. Even when they do, sometimes you have to know where, and how, and why to look.” She sighed.

This ounce of narrative, sheltered as it was by itself, seemed to reflect on the entire cooperative writing experience. Here, the character stops in the square to look around at who walks by, what takes place. And underneath the small soliloquy, we can hear the author reflecting on the process of communicating via networks, collaborative writing spaces, and the Internet: “sometimes, you have to know where, and how, and why to look.”

What was most meaningful about the novel in a day experiment is the way that it encouraged participants, from the start, to inhabit each other’s sentences—to put their words more fully into conversation with the words of others. One of the final activities of the month had participants writing Twitter Essays of exactly 140-characters to define writing digitally. Janine DeBaise (@writingasjoe) tweeted, “My fingers tap the keys. I pause to consider. Who on earth is listening? Could be anyone, anywhere. I keep typing #digiwrimo #twitteressay.”

The Pleasures of Digital Texts

Beyond the concerns of composition instruction, beyond even the concerns of the educational endeavor, something is happening to language and writing in the digital age. The texture of it, its species, is changing. Writing online might be considered what Roland Barthes calls “writing aloud.” As he writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*: “*Writing aloud* is not expressive ... it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art” (66–67). For Barthes, words and language have a material quality. However, he takes this a step further when he describes “writing aloud,” vocalizations that bring character and not content to words, shifting value almost entirely from the signified to the signifier, from what words represent to what they can be made to do.

Roland Barthes writes further about the interactivity of written texts: “What I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface” (12). His use of the word “abrasions” suggests that there is something almost violent about the way we interact with a written text. He also suggests that reading is something we “impose” upon a text and not something a text imposes upon us. Digital writing tears at the

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text's cohesive fabric, punctures its skin, rips its pages and paragraphs, dissects its innards. This is what digital writing asks of us, as well.

Digital Writing Month may have closed at the end of that November, but it hardly reached a conclusion. Instead, the community of digital writers, including teachers, students, administrators, technologists, were left to reformulate what they thought about writing, digital writing, and the nature of authorship in the digital age. Through our continued work with those writers, and our further meditations on digital writing, we feel confident offering the following tenets:

1. Digital writing is *networked*. The digital text is connected, as are its readers and writers. Everything on the Internet is metonymic. In digital space, everything is *next to* everything else: people, ideas, high-culture, low-culture, art, trash, literary texts, plagiarized texts, etc. What the Web lacks in depth, it makes up for by having a good deal more surface. Digital writing harnesses this broad surface by emphasizing links, networks, and communal context. Digital writing brings the text into more direct conversation with its sources, dismantling hierarchies of critical thought. The work of the reader and the work of the writer are coterminous on the page.

2. Digital writing is *collaborative*. Conventional notions of authorship are contested in digital space. Many digital texts are coauthored, unattributed, or blended on the page so that it becomes impossible to distinguish one author from another. Loss Pequeño Glazier writes in *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, "We do not want to be distracted by the 'image versus text,' or other essentially analog debates" (178). In digital space, image and text have a simultaneity, a dependence, an inseparability. Digital writing invites its reader (once a mere satellite) into a more intimate, more provocative dance. Even when the work is not produced by multiple authors/artists, it becomes collaborative when it's given generously to its readers.

3. Digital writing is *defiant*. Digital space is always already new, creating and recreating itself even as we look at it (and live within it). Digital writing is neither contained nor obedient. It defies its own virtuality by being textured and lively, 3-dimensional and populous. It speaks to us from a (usually) flat screen with the potential to engage us in a tangible and visceral way.

Digital writing is as much about how we express an idea as it is about where the idea's expressed, and why. This is composition of a different order. It is composition that does not always begin with words, but with the choice of mode, container, and network. Because the array of fora for expression are as many as sites on the Internet, the choice of word does not need to come first; instead, the choice of medium precedes the writing. And the knowledge that all vocalizations will be re-vocalized, rewritten, and distributed by others (in an analogue to the oral tradition) influences as much the choice of what to say as the choice of where to say it.

The LMS has as its thesis the limitation of modes of learning. It is not as transformable a space as an on-ground classroom. However, ingenuity and intention, a critical look at how online spaces can be made more permeable, and a desire to experiment and play, can open even limited course containers to innovative and creative pedagogy. What must be advocated is an

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acknowledgement that, while the Internet has not necessarily changed the way people learn, it does present new modes of invention—modes that offer brilliant, unexplored territory for writing, reading, and learning.

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[experiment/](#)>

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Some text of this paper is adapted directly from:

Morris, Sean Michael. "Digital Writing Uprising: Third Order Thinking in the Digital Humanities." *Hybrid Pedagogy*. 8 Oct. 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2013.
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