

Three Foundational Concepts for Tutoring Digital Writing

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A social *turn*, such as the *digital turn*, is a recognized moment in time when a society changes its ways of thinking of reality. The digital turn is a recognized moment when our society began to think of reality through and within a digital perspective. This turn affects all aspects of our society, including education and academic writing. The impact on writing centers and tutoring has been profound. Since the digital turn, the digital tools commonly used to write and produce enable and determine our praxis as writers and writing tutors. Writers increasingly think in and through digital writing tools (Deuze 137), and we engage with students in this digitally-influenced process during tutoring sessions. Digital tools hook us and our students into searchable information reservoirs and provide multimodal narrative forms and scholarship. These tools also connect individual writers with community, and their infrastructures shape the social interactions of public-facing writers and collaborators.

An important aspect of tutoring after the digital turn involves understanding the risks of digital writing tools and helping students navigate them. Some of these risks involve the ways digital tools learn the behaviors of users and profit from their activity through surveillance and data collection (Prasso). Other risks result from the tools' design as socially stratified and economically and racially unequal social spaces (Gonzales, Calarco, and Lynch 5). It is within this unequal and risk-laden context that writing tutors work and that students write. Tutors require training in digital literacy—practical, hands-on training in the terminology and language and risks of digital writing tools. Training manuals and procedures need to be developed specific to writing centers and writing tutoring. From these, writing centers should develop support materials—digital writing guides—for students to use as they think in and with the tools they're using for writing and research. Faculty may also

use these support materials in writing assignments and projects when providing feedback and assessment.

Student writers use digital tools to create digital writing projects (e.g., blogs, podcasts), and, in turn, create online socialities: social-media lives and digital footprints (van Dijck 33; Depietro 185). Supporting the development of student writers must involve more than a provision of access to and instructions for digital tools precisely because the act of writing is entwined and embedded in digital writing tools and their social environments, which shape and constrain writers in new and often unexpected ways. Writing centers are spaces where students and instructors have opportunities to work in and through the politicized and often hidden aspects of digital writing.

As writing center scholars, we have long considered how to support students with digital writing projects, as well as how to tutor digital writing (Trimbur 30; Grutsch McKinney 29). At the same time, it is increasingly the case that we must commit more deliberately to both communicating that students can and, indeed, should seek support for digital projects at our centers, as well as providing training for tutors in digital writing support. Since all writing is digitized in some way, it is necessary to return to our philosophical foundations around understandings of writing and collaboration—both radically transformed by the digital turn. More necessary than before, our support for students must be rooted in an appreciation of the relationship between writer and writing tool, which we might describe as an *enmeshment*, where the two are caught up together in relational practices and assemblages of writing tools, tooled-up writing, writers, scholarship, and IT technical knowledge (see Wargo 5).

To support students in understanding and then navigating this enmeshment, tutors require training in specific and nuanced terminology and language of digital tools and writing—digital tool literacy. To this end, we are suggesting three foundational concepts that speak to the writing center experience of the digital turn: *tooled-up writing*, *digital writing projects*, and *digital writing tools*. These terms reflect the digital turn's paradigm shift for writing centers and help to conceptualize and categorize digital writing—what it looks like, how it's created, where it lives, and what it does (and for whom).

TOOLED-UP WRITING

First used in manufacturing in the 1930s, *tool up* describes the act of equipping for a task by selecting and using the specific tools needed. Stephanie Bell borrows this term to recast digital writing

“as a means of (re)making knowledge, self, community, and place through forms of digital authoring” (1). For writers, the phrase allows an acknowledgment of tooled-up practices, as well as the connections between writing and writing tool, as each necessarily influences the other. Writing-as-technology enables discrete practices for working through ideas, retrieving information, making connections, and producing meaning (Emig 14).

Writing involves the use of multiple secondary technologies that enable and shape human processes and products: a pencil’s free-formness; a word processor’s linearity. The ways writing technologies shape writers and their writing is captured best by *extended mind theory*, which contends that the human mind may exist external to the physical body in an “active externalism.” Consider, for instance, the pencil or stylus acting as an additional appendage, constraining experience, action, and thought. When the brain is “linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction,” the coupling “can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right” (Clark and Chalmers 48, 50). This approach asks us to acknowledge that writers and writing tools are enmeshed: “the world and its objects are essential to the ability to think, speak, write, make, and act” (Brooke and Rickert 168). Using this reasoning, Mark Deuze insists that we live “a media life” (138), living *within* media, no longer simply *with* media.

Writing centers can help student writers become aware of the ways writing tools make cognition possible through learning by “making, playing, and tinkering” with digital tools (Bell 2). This involves encouraging students to integrate multimodal production with digital writing tools into their recursive writing processes. In one-to-one tutoring sessions, this can be done, for example, by inviting a student working on a podcast project to record a brief audio clip. The opportunity to listen back to early drafting work can foster revision based on greater understanding of the ideal listening experience. Writing with sound is an embodied experience. We can hear the layers of sounds, feel sound vibrations, and see soundwave forms in an audio editing tool’s display as they are recorded. In this way, the writer writes *within* the recording tool’s software, which contributes to author decisions about structure and content. The writer is not always constrained by the tool as the tool can also be a co-author. A recursive writing process with, in, and through digital writing tools prompts writers to consider a participatory listening experience in an audio composition as they refine, clarify, rethink, re-see. This is tooled-up writing; it involves consciously writing with, in, and through the right “tools for the job.” For writing tutors, referring to writing as “tooled up” can be a means of acknowledging the constitutive role of digital tools in the production of meaning,

and of prompting an expansion of tutoring strategies attuned to effective multimodal production processes.

DIGITAL WRITING PROJECTS (DWPS)

Digital writing projects take many forms: blogs, wikis, podcasts, videos, memes, comics, infographics, slide presentations, playlists, and collages. Although these are quite diverse, they tend to share common characteristics. They are

- inventive and in-process;
- multimodal and highly designed;
- networked and interconnected via the Internet;
- produced using digital writing tools (hardware and apps);
- focused on the user’s visual, often multi-sensory and interactive, experience;
- public-facing, meaning online and publicly available with varying degrees of visibility;
- unconventional, often playful and creative, while being rigorous, informative, and scholarly.

DWPs may not privilege written text as a primary modality, which means that they often call for a broader conception of “writing” and “text.” They employ different rhetorics that may seem less textual, formal, rigorous. DWPs are sites of interaction, networked and public-facing like a town square, rather than separated like a cloister. However, they invite students to engage in a variety of scholarly tasks—explication of abstract concepts, analysis, critique, reflection, argumentation. Arguably, DWPs enhance these tasks with opportunities to think with and through digital tools, multimodality, multiliteracy, and connectivity. This can involve a journey of “making, playing, and tinkering” with digital tools (Bell 2) that expands the ways in which writing is a “unique mode of learning” (Emig 7). DWPs are academically meaningful and rigorous, both as knowledge producers and products.

As writing tutors, we can support students in their efforts to recognize the “assignment verbs” (e.g., make, record, design, create) implicit within digital writing projects and take advantage of the learning opportunities such projects present. For example, when a student is asked to create a podcast, the assignment will use verbs such as “design,” “record,” and “produce,” verbs not often associated with academic writing. In such a project, the verb “edit” takes on greater meaning, as it refers to both editing the

words in a podcast script, as well as editing the recorded audio files in an audio editing tool. Further complicating this is that many faculty, in our experience, do not fully grasp these assignment verbs employed in their digital writing assignments. Tutors trained in digital writing support can provide students with an understanding of both writing and production of a podcast, by becoming literate in the terminology (e.g., assignment verbs) and the resulting rhetoric.

DIGITAL WRITING TOOLS (DWTs)

As Robinson Meyer explains, “The computer is a writing tool. Tweets, papers, email: They’re all composed in what is, at least in part, writing software.... Writing tools are everywhere.” *Digital writing tools* (DWTs) are combinations of software and hardware that permit writing, document design, and circulation; they make words material. Students live within DWTs’ influences. Writing tutors should be equipped to support students as they navigate these influences by, for instance, helping students to experiment with a variety of digital writing tools as they brainstorm, outline and organize, and edit.

DWTs, like all writing tools, are not neutral technological objects. Ian Roderick explains that technological objects are products of their social environments with the power to influence not just how users think and interact but also what they think about. For students and instructors, each DWT has the potential to affect how writing is understood, framed, and approached with implications for outcomes of that writing. DWTs are designed to make certain kinds of writing possible, which, in turn, can perpetuate certain approaches to, uses of, and attitudes about writing. An example is Jon Wargo’s 2018 study of children using GoPro cameras to produce video essays.

In Wargo’s study, children first see the writing tools, GoPro cameras or wearables, as passive, but then the tools transform. This transformation occurs within the children’s experience and use of the tool to write—the digital writing tool becomes a co-author and the children experiencing the wearable as “writing with us” (1). If DWTs are co-authors, composition “from a more-than-human” or post-human “perspective is a writing *with*” (3). DWTs, then, are not passive. From a post-human perspective, writing moves from a “way of being” to a “way of becoming”...Writing is always already a becoming of future relations *with*. In such an instance, technology as co-author affects structures, and formats inform content, syntax, grammar, and spelling, which then inform style, pedagogy, and instruction, ultimately affecting knowledge production and acquisition. As a result, writing centers require

rhetorics and pedagogies based in multiliteracies for supporting the multimodality of digital media writing and production (Grutsch McKinney 34-35).

In our writing centers we are not seeing digital writing projects in the numbers that we know are being assigned. We should be seeing more. Students and faculty will continue to shift in their use of digital platforms and will continue to change the way DWTs are used and experienced. The students in Wargo's study who see DWTs as posthuman co-authors will be in our classes and writing centers in only a few years. These students will expect that when they come to our centers, we can understand their language, thought processes, and rhetoric when using these tools. We need to provide support to students and faculty in writing with these tools, reveal and explain biases and inequities in these tools and platforms, and provide training for our tutors and procedures for our centers.

Writing centers also need to be aware of the ways DWTs affect writers, effects often purposefully hidden from the writer. *Machine bias*, for example, embedded in DWTs, has implications for reproducing and perpetuating inequalities based in economics, geography, and ethnicity, which cause vulnerability and anxiety among student writers and tutors. Machine-biased algorithms are rhetorical and come to the writer already biased (McRaney) due to biases of DWT programmers (Beck; Simonite). For example, Microsoft Word's dictionary rejects certain words (*Englishes*; non-gendered pronoun, *hir*), voice-recognition software recognizes only certain speech patterns, and search engines provide results that are gendered and racially selective.

Estee Beck's analysis of persuasive computer algorithms helps us think of DWTs as opaque-with-code with a pleasant visual interface. When algorithms work well, their coding is invisible, and we lose sight of the ways they engineer and create our experiences of DWTs. Even when the manipulation of personal data by "surveillance capitalists" (i.e., Facebook and Cambridge Analytica) (see Szalai) and terms-of-service agreements that blur ownership of user-created content (Instagram) is revealed, use of these tools does not decrease. What writing centers can provide is an ability to reveal to students how their writing is part of these inequities and biases simply by their use of DWTs. Our centers can provide a conceptual shift for students who may not know of these inequities and biases.

TURNING TO MEET STUDENTS

For writing centers, the digital turn prompts a return to questions

about our purposes and positionings within higher education. In her consideration of writing-center-as-multiliteracy-center, Grutsch McKinney argues, “A radical shift in the way that writers communicate both academically and publicly necessitates a radical re-imagining and re-understanding of our practices, purposes, and goals” (49). Our centers and tutors support all writing projects at any point in students’ writing process. Our centers are about thinking and knowledge-making (Kinkead and Harris), as well as providing access to academic discourse. To continue in these tasks, we need to become literate in the languages and terminologies of the digital turn in order to instruct and tutor students and support faculty in these processes and assignments. Such language can be useful to train tutors, to write policies and procedures, to develop rhetoric and discourse, and to communicate within the communities of writing centers. We offer this terminology to create momentum for the project of reformulating the understandings of writing that inform our praxis post-digital turn.



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