COMBINING TRADITIONAL AND NEW LITERACIES IN A 21ST-CENTURY WRITING WORKSHOP

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Learn how to integrate easy-to-use technology into stages of the writing process in order to enhance how elementary students plan, write, and create digital stories.

It’s movie night. Children and adults are packed into Room 3B, a third-grade classroom on the second floor of a 1925 vintage, New England prekindergarten through grade 3 public school. The guests in this small-town school are not there to watch a Hollywood production or a childhood classic, but rather to savor the digital storytelling accomplishments of Jenn Bogard’s (first author) 17 third graders.

The genesis for the children’s new literacy practices began 17 years earlier in New London, New Hampshire, not far from Jenn’s classroom. For a week in 1994, 10 international educators, soon to be known as the New London Group, met to discuss the future of literacy pedagogy, which at that time was limited to “teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms for the national language” (New London Group, 1996, p. 61). The New London Group (1996), credited with coining the term multiliteracies, set out to broaden our understanding of what it means to be literate by attending to multiple modes of representation and the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity.

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Today, terms such as *multimedia* (Ranker, 2008), *new literacies* (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2010; Mills, 2010), *multimodal* (Sweeney, 2010; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010), and *digital storytelling* (Hull & Nelson, 2005) are used to signify practices for making meaning that transcend language and include photography, art, music, video, or audio representations.

Although there is a paucity of research on composing across modalities at the elementary level, there are several relevant studies on which we base our work. For example, Ranker’s (2008) case study of two fifth graders acknowledged the interactive, nonlinear movement among media sources that allowed the boys to go beyond what they could have accomplished from any one *mode* (source) or *medium* (vehicle) (Kress, 2005) individually. In addition, Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman (2010) investigated students’ composing practices and concluded that multimodal composing had a profound effect on what they termed “authorial stances”—how authors take on literate identities. The fifth graders in this study learned multimodal skills that transformed how they defined themselves and how they positioned themselves as literate individuals within a community of learners.

We, like many of our colleagues, are beginning to explore ways in which new literacies can augment traditional literacy practices to enhance learning. The relevance of using technology to support literacy is increasingly evident as our schools prepare students for careers and college (National Governors Association Center and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

In this article, we document the processes we used to explore digital storytelling, or what Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman (2010) referred to as “multimodal storytelling,” a term that more precisely defines the “wide range of digital and non-digital composing” (p. 447) found in our work with the third graders. Through our exploration, we sought to understand the blending of time-honored literacy customs (e.g., graphic organizers, pen and paper drafts) with new literacies (e.g., video-editing software applications).

To inform our instruction, we documented each stage of the recursive writing process with flip cameras, digital cameras, audio recorders, field notes, student surveys, and writing samples. All children’s names in this article are pseudonyms, and student quotations are verbatim excerpts from audio or written sources. The third graders took an active role in using technology to document their learning, thus providing all of us with a means to reflect metacognitively on our processes and new understandings. In the remainder of this article, we describe how the children immersed themselves in the writing process to create digital stories.

**Collecting Ideas in a Notebook**

The students in 3B began their study of personal narratives like many other third graders do, by collecting “kernels” of ideas in their notebooks, knowing that some of these kernels would be “popped” into detailed stories, whereas others would remain quick writes. They taped phrases from magazines, buttons, and birthday candles onto notebook pages and wrote about memories that were sparked by the objects, such as finding an antique bottle, spotting bald...
among the steps as needed. allowed them to move recursively maintaining a level of flexibility that the following five-step process, while olds were ready to begin the process craft exercises complete, the 9-year-olds participated in their narratives. They participated in choosing an idea and writing their own narratives. They participated in hearing the language of personal narratives and discuss how they are discussed mentor texts, including Julie Brinckloe’s *Fireflies*, Jonathan London’s *Puddles*, and Jane Yolen’s *Owl Moon*, all of which allowed them to hear the language of personal narratives and discuss how they are structured.

With notebooks full of ideas and craft exercises complete, the 9-year-olds were ready to begin the process of choosing an idea and writing their own narratives. They participated in the following five-step process, while maintaining a level of flexibility that allowed them to move recursively among the steps as needed.

**Step 1: Planning**

Although planning is an important part of the writing process (Hayes & Flower, 1980), young children typically do not devote much time to planning (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). In fact, Cameron and Moshenko (1996) found the “start-up time” (i.e., planning time) of 53 sixth graders to be between 15 seconds and 387 seconds, with the average being just over two minutes. Similarly, fifth and sixth graders identified with learning disabilities spent less than one minute planning, even though they were prompted to plan before writing and encouraged to take as much time as needed to do so (MacArthur & Graham, 1987).

Students with learning disabilities may display these characteristics, but the traits are not limited to children with learning disabilities. For example, early in the school year, Jenn asked her third graders to respond to this question: “How do you plan your story once you have an idea?” The responses of Frank, Ann, and Lucy illustrate the planning processes of three capable writers: Frank wrote, “I right [sic] whatever comes to mind.” Ann wrote, “When I have an idey [sic] I write it down and then soon another idey [sic] pops in my head.” Lucy answered, “I think deep down and [write] whatever comes to me first.”

These children, and many others, rely on what Troia (2007) referred to as a “retrieve-and-write text generation process” (p. 132) or what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) called a “what-next” strategy. Unlike adults, children tend to focus on generating content when they plan, “us[ing] the assignment itself as a plan—a plan focused largely on retrieving relevant content from memory” (McCutchen, 2006, p. 117).

To get students thinking about their stories—in other words, their macrostructures (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978)—Jenn had them map out key points using one of three possible graphic organizers (see Joshua’s graphic organizer, Figure 1).

**Step 2: Developing Stories Through Recorded Oral Rehearsal**

Once the story maps were complete, writer’s workshop began to look and sound different than it had in the past. Rather than having students move from graphic organizers to written drafts, Jenn had them produce what we termed recorded oral rehearsal, audio recordings that allowed the children to verbalize and elaborate their developing stories. Myhill and Jones (2009) suggested that having students engage in oral rehearsal may reduce the cognitive load associated with translating ideas into written texts. When writing, the central executive of working memory must simultaneously attend to generating language, planning and reviewing ideas, and holding “multiple representations of the text in working memory” (Kellogg, 2008, p. 3). Oral rehearsal may take some of the burden off the central executive and thereby free up resources students could use to enhance the quality of their stories— in other words, serve as an “external memory” (Graham & Harris, 2007).

Jenn introduced three technology tools that were available for recorded oral rehearsals. First, she reviewed how to use Photo Booth, Apple software that lets students take photos using their computer’s built-in camera and record short video that can be saved for future use. The software, included on all Macs with iSight, Apple’s built-in webcam, makes it possible for users
to change backdrops and colors. The recording process is simple: Students simply click one button and record their thoughts.

Next, Jenn demonstrated TuneTalk Stereo, a small recording device that students plugged into the bottom doc connector of their two classroom iPod nanos to convert them into digital audio recorders (Figure 2). TuneTalk, which costs about $40.00, contains two omnidirectional microphones. To record, students select “Voice Memos” from the main menu of the iPod and then “Start recording.”

Finally, Jenn introduced the Livescribe Pulse Smartpen, a pen that is slightly larger than a regular ballpoint pen (Figure 3). The Smartpen contains a camera and microphone, which capture everything writers say and draw. Students activate the pen’s audio and visual features by tapping “start”—one of several icons that run across the bottom of special Smartpen dot paper. While sketching images associated with their stories, students talk through their plots. To replay the audio recording, students tap on any part of their written work—in this case, their sketches—to begin the playback from that spot in the story. A USB connector allows users to recharge the pen and transfer both their written and audio work to a computer. A 2GB pen and 150-page dot paper notebook with perforated pages costs approximately $120.00.

Because Jenn’s students had used Photo Booth in second grade and some had used TuneTalk Stereo to work on fluency, Jenn focused most of her instruction on the Livescribe Smartpen. Using a document camera so everyone could see, she told the story of a common experience, a fire drill, and sketched the main parts of the story. As a class, everyone discussed other possible strategies for sketching, such as symbols and arrows to show the order of events (see an example of Joshua’s sketches in Figure 4).

After this demonstration, students selected the technology tool they wanted to use to record the oral drafts of their personal narratives. Most students selected the Smartpen. Two used iPods; no one chose Photo Booth. When Jenn asked the children why they didn’t select Photo Booth, they all agreed that they

![Figure 1: Joshua’s Story Map Graphic Organizer](image-url)
enjoyed using this tool in the past but wanted to try the new or relatively new tools.

Talking out a story and hearing it played back was beneficial for most students. Joshua, for example, a high-achieving learner, expressed that writing was “very, very frustrating.” Before the opportunity of oral planning, Joshua typically wrote one or two sentences during workshop and spent the rest of the time thinking or doodling. He felt as if “every word should be right.” By telling his story orally before drafting, he was able to revise with ease and avoid the angst he had been experiencing when beginning a piece of writing.

Joshua used an action lead to begin his story of finding an old perfume bottle by the riverbank: “I zoomed down on my bicycle. I zoomed down the road. I was flying. And suddenly, I slammed on my breaks and I was in the park across the street from my house. I let my bike drop to the ground and I ran down to the riverbank. And then I started looking for bottles.” He continued to talk out his memory with details as though he were talking with a friend. Next, he listened to his recording as he looked at the result of his oral plan: a flowchart that he had drawn as he talked out his story (Figure 4). The flowchart had symbols and quick sketches to represent the bike, the park, his cut finger, and the bottle. It also contained arrows that connected the events.

After tapping his sketches to replay his lead, Joshua commented, “This part is good.” And when he came to the part in which he explained how he cut his finger, he said, “This part is no good. I’m going to listen so I know where I should pick up from.” He listened again to the full story, crossing off an entire section with ease. In his second recording, he added details about how he cut his finger on the bottle and how he found another bottle while rinsing his finger off. He noted, “I decided I would try to pull the one [bottle] up next to it.” He explained that he had found another bottle in the mud, close to where he found the first one, and wanted to pick this one up out of the mud, too.

Joshua was on a quest to find the meaningful details of his story. He continued to listen with a critical ear, adding, “This part is no good either,” as he omitted the part about how people used to throw their trash into the riverbank, clarifying that he would lose the focus of the meaningful moment.
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Figure 3  Erika’s Storyboard (Cover Page)

Figure 4  Erika’s Storyboard (Page 1)

of finding a bottle if he were to go into detail about where the bottles came from. Joshua expressed the power of telling and revising his story aloud before physically writing his story as he reflected, “Usually, if I write something all down on the paper, I just keep it. Talking my story out with the pen helped me because I could take things out that weren’t important to the story.” He also explained, “I could hear it being said and I could know how it sounded.”

When interviewed at the beginning of the year, William, an emerging reader and writer, stated, “I draw a lot, so I don’t usually have time to write.” William used the Smartpen to plan his story about the time he and his grandmother played with her dog, Sandy. He referred to his story map as he sketched and talked out the story: “Me and grandma were throwing a thing...a rope...to her dog. And sometimes she wouldn’t get it. And sometimes grandma would have to get it. And she would throw it to Sandy and Sandy would miss it, so I would have to get it. Once, when I was getting ready to throw it, she bit me on my best pair of pants. After that, grandma said, ‘No!’ and then Sandy ran to me.” William continued to talk his story out all the way to the end.

After recording, William looked at his sketches and commented, “Wow! I said a lot but I didn’t draw very much.” Like William, many students were surprised at how sparse their sketches were as they spoke, indicating an important shift for some: The focus was on the words and the meaning of the story, not on the drawings. For William and learners like him, the pictures served as a scaffold for elaborating on the details of his story, whereas they had previously used sketching to avoid writing. When discussing the process of oral planning with a friend, William reported, “I can hear what I said, and I can remember what happened, and I can see if I forgot something.” Recorded oral rehearsal allowed William to take “risks that widened the scope of [his] composing practices” (Vasudevan et al., 2010, p. 461).
Step 3: Listening, Critically Thinking, and Conferring

We hadn’t planned for writing partners to sit together and listen to one another’s oral telling, but this quickly became the norm. As Frank, an eager, high-achieving student, began to sketch his story, his writing partner, Ann, raced over and sat beside him, wanting to see the pen in action. Ann listened carefully while Frank told a brief account of getting a new bike for his birthday. For students like Frank, the process of hearing his recorded story encouraged him to slow down and pay careful attention to his words before jotting them down on paper. Frank reflected on this process, “When I heard myself say, ‘And I walked outside,’ it made me think about how I walked outside. I searched my brain for the memory and I changed it to ‘I sprinted outside’ so that I would show everyone how excited I was.” Oral planning gave Frank the opportunity to “play around with the words.”

After Ann listened to Frank’s story, she asked, “Can I hear the part about the bike again?” She pressed the pen to her recording. He said, “Could I hear this part again?” as he clicked on the part she was referring to. He heard, “letting love into Ollie’s life” and responded, “You might want to say, ‘letting love into my cat, Ollie’s life.’” Ann replied, “The pen helped me hear what the story sounded like. It told me whether I should add more or take something out that I didn’t need.”

Step 4: Creating Storyboards

The third graders spent three to four weeks of daily writer’s workshop completing the first three steps of this recursive process and now had written drafts of their stories, which they revised and edited. They were eager to begin their storyboards—simple graphic organizers that contained three parts: (1) the narration, (2) sketches, and (3) the media list. Each part served a distinct purpose, as noted next (see
the beginning of Erika’s storyboard in Figures 5 and 6).

**Narration.** The children understood that each storyboard page would become a frame in their digital stories and that the text they attached to each page would be used for the voiceovers. To demonstrate how a text might be separated into meaningful sections of narration, or frames, Jenn referred back to mentor picture books. Using a think-aloud, she examined how authors and illustrators chunk ideas. She also had Erika read her story aloud and talk about how she could logically break apart her text. Erika decided that her lead might be its own frame and wondered if powerful images should stand alone in a frame.

For instance, Erika wrote, “I was watching mom as her hair was blowing as if the wind wanted her to come with it.” The class agreed that this part should be supported by its own picture. After discussing Erika’s story and studying mentor texts, most of the students were ready to think of their writing in reasonable frames, yet there were some who wanted to separate their stories sentence by sentence and needed additional guidance. After careful consideration, the students photocopied their drafts, cut them apart, and glued them onto separate pages of their storyboards. The original drafts were kept intact so they could refer back to them if need be.

**Sketch.** To help children position their written texts with images that would accompany the frames in their digital stories, Jenn had them draw a sketch (i.e., placeholders of sorts) on each page of their storyboards. The sketches represented the photos or artwork the children intended to use in their digital stories.
Media List. The media list was a checklist of possible visuals that would replace the sketches in the students’ digital stories. The children could take their own photographs; create pictures on TuxPaint (a digital drawing program); draw pictures with a medium such as watercolor, pastels or pencil; or find images online. The only online resource students used for photos was www.pics4learning.com, a source that provides copyright permission to teachers and students.

Students added items to the media list, too; for instance, some decided to create art from clay and tissue paper. Erika used a combination of resources: TuxPaint, watercolors, and pastels, whereas Joshua had a family member take a photo of him as he came to a sudden stop on his bike by the riverbank. Planning with the storyboard required deep thinking about the content of the writing. Students made more revisions than ever before, edited for mechanics, and conferred with the teacher. The children were truly invested in writing carefully crafted stories that accurately conveyed their personal experiences.

Step 5: Producing Digital Stories
The work of recursively planning, rehearsing, drafting, revising, and creating storyboards happened during Jenn’s designated writer’s workshop time. When the children were ready to create the digital stories, she allocated three computer lab periods for them to learn about and to use iMovie, an Apple video editing software application that comes on all Macs. With iMovie, users can browse for photos, scanned pictures, or video clips that are on their computers and drop them into frames on an iMovie screen. The images can easily be rearranged by dragging them from one frame to another. Those using iMovie can zoom in on images and add music from sources such as iTunes or Garageband. (Similar software, such as PhotoStory, is available on many PCs [Miller, 2010].)

Once the students understood iMovie’s features, they returned to their storyboards and matched their sketches with actual photos or pictures they now had on their laptops. They dropped the images into iMovie and thoughtfully reflected on the sequencing of events. Rob, for example, intended to use his digital story to describe the day he took his first airplane flying lesson. He shared, “It was really hard to get all of my flying pictures in the right order. I had to keep reading my writing over again and try to figure out what happened first and then next. I had to switch two events around to make it like it really happened on the day of my flying lesson.” Moving from a traditional literacy practice to the iMovie provided Rob with what Ranker (2008) referred to as a moment of “textual punctuation” (p. 214), that is, natural stopping points that provide authors with opportunities to reflect on what they need to do to achieve their goals. Having the visuals clearly aided some children in the sequencing, revision, and elaboration of ideas.

Returning once again to the narratives on their storyboards, the authors used a podcast microphone to record and rerecord their voiceovers until they were satisfied that their narrations sounded like real stories. Music and sound effects were added. In the process of learning how to use this software, Jenn also taught her students how to cite sources, which they included as scrolling credits at the end of each digital movie.

Sharing was spontaneous as students called “Come hear this!” while making their movies. Sharing also involved a wider audience as writers burned their digital stories to compact discs and brought them home for family members to view. William planned to give his digital movie to his grandmother for Christmas. The audience continued to expand as children invited families into school to view their digital story on a projected screen. Brittany put her invitation in her mother’s purse in hopes that she would come.

Shaping and Reshaping Literacy Opportunities
Graham and Harris (2007) posited that students are more likely to
engage in planning if writing is produced for authentic purposes and audiences. We agree. But we caution that not all planning leads to high-quality texts. To be effective, plans should enable writers to convert their intended thoughts into well-developed, organized written texts. For the children in 3B, recorded oral rehearsal was an effective planning strategy; it allowed them to formulate ideas, revisit their initial thinking, and make decisions about what was working or not working without placing the considerable cognitive demands on working memory that written texts require. Producing meaningful discovery drafts within an environment of collaboration provided opportunities for the students to adopt “authorial stances” (Vasudevan et al., 2010) of capable storytellers and writers.

In Jenn’s class, the celebration of these digital stories signaled closure to her unit on personal narratives; however, the cycle of weaving traditional and new literacies throughout the stages of the writing process continued as she introduced her students to realistic fiction. Jenn began the second unit as she did the first, by analyzing the characteristics of this genre. Comfortable with using technology for planning, each student drew a story mountain and used the Smartpen to record how story events would unfold. Partners clicked on any point of the mountain to hear each event and to discuss with their partners the important moments at the top of their mountains, the turning points of their stories. When it was time to create their digital stories, the writing pieces were full of details that could be traced back to the planning stage, when students were engaged in discussing their audio discovery drafts before writing their stories on paper.

Recorded oral rehearsal and digital storytelling are proving to be particularly powerful during our current unit on poetry. Students are making decisions about the location of line breaks in their poems based on how their recorded readings sound. They are playing with the line breaks to create meaning by adjusting the breaks and rerecording. As they draft their poems, writers are already discussing ways to make the writing come alive for a wide audience through a blog that Jenn created. For example, Lucy called to her writing partner, who was drafting a poem about growing up, “You should look around your house tonight for pictures of when you were a baby and put them in your movie.” The third graders have already received comments from countless blog viewers about their posted personal narratives and realistic fictions [Note: Jenn approves all comments before they are posted].

Hull (2003) noted the need to expand what it means to be literate in today’s world and suggested, among other things, that we provide students with “the space and support to communicate critically, aesthetically, lovingly, and agentively” (p.230). Using nondigital and digital resources continues to be engaging and supportive for Jenn’s young writers. Day by day, they shape and reshape what it means for them to be literate in the 21st century.

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REFERENCES

MORE TO EXPLORE
ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans
■ “Using Picture Books to Teach Setting Development in Writing Workshop” by Sharon Roth
■ “Writers’ Workshop: The Biographical Sketch” by Lisa L. Owens
IRA Journal Article
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