Red Pen or Cursor? Assimilation and Resistance in a Digital Writing Workshop

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THE PARADIGM THAT DIDN'T REALLY SHIFT

In her 1982 speech to writing teachers, rhetorician Maxine Hairston offered a meticulous historical look at what was then new research, but recognized that most writing teachers were still teaching in the ways they'd been taught. Hairston invoked physicist/philosopher Thomas Kuhn, declaring that composition was shifting its paradigm from an emphasis on product to process: " … the writing teachers' frustration and disenchantment may be less important than the fact that if they teach from the traditional paradigm, they are frequently emphasizing techniques that the research has largely dis-credited" (78). Why are so many writing teachers teaching the same way they were taught? It's forty years later. And now, in 2021, in an educational culture that demands quantification and replication, product is even more valued than when Hairston spoke of a paradigm shift. Not much has changed or shifted, and we are in the midst of a new paradigm— the increasingly digital educational space.

Hairston spoke and wrote those words two years after the introduction of the Apple II, well before personal computers appeared in writing classes. Our discs were floppy, connections unreliable, and printer paper had little holes that tore. There were a few writing instructors experimenting with long-distance phone lines, lurking at midnight with clunky software. There was no Internet, no Wikipedia. Those of us who had been teaching writing were awed by the power of

the cursor and the delete key. But alas, although our computer life has grown and developed, and shifted our technological writing paradigm, not much has changed in the way we teach writing, revision, and response. Kuhn and Hairston reminded us that we work within a paradigm until something changes. Ways of teaching writing are based on traditions borne well before 1982 and well before the computing era.

In a sociological/anthropological sphere, we've come to label responding as "performance" (Turner) and "presentation of self" (Cantwell; Goffman; Newkirk). The Library of Congress's *Ethnographic Thesaurus* threads 21 very general categories for it; a quick glance shows "performance" is nuanced differently in various academic fields. Anthropologists know that a culture re-presents itself to itself when it performs in a public space (Cantwell; Handelman). And we consider writing a public space performance: a writer, a reader, and a crafted message.

In this chapter, we recount three examples of college students re-imagining how they respond to writing mediated by digital tools. In a course called "Approaches to Teaching Writing" (ATW), we worked with students who are all heading toward a career connected to writing. They seek teaching licensure and a bachelor's or masters, they work towards an MFA in writing, or are PhD students preparing themselves to teach composition. During the one semester's course we team-taught, we asked students to respond to example texts in two different forms: as teacher and as peer, using a collaborative online word processor. This course took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was therefore fully in-person. During that semester, we recorded reflective conversations and took notes on how students interacted inside their assigned writing groups and within the texts. All the students enrolled in the class participated, and we assigned a pseudonym to each to protect their privacy. We categorized their responses, as well as our combined notes and observations using Saldaña's in vivo coding. Our interpretive approach sought to understand emerging topics that we turned into the categories we use later in this chapter. Then, in two additional semesters, Michael taught the same course solo. He asked students to deposit several versions of one major paper over the course of those semesters, and gave explicit instructions to writing groups about how they should respond. Students used the same collaborative online word processor as the previous semester. Spring 2020 began in-person, but transitioned online as the country shut down. Fall 2020 was entirely online. Students' reflections after the final deposit served to support the conclusions from our team-taught semester's data.

DIGITAL WRITING SPACE AS A NEW PARADIGM

The introduction of home computing began to reshape how we think, learn, connect and compose. Our old mindset was linear, individual, and product-driven. Learning spaces reflected this mindset: top-down, with knowledge located in individuals and institutions. Our "new" mindset is a different way of thinking entirely, one that values collaboration, decentering knowledge and power (Cope and Kalantzis 5; Knobel and Lankshear 81). We say "new" only to contrast with the former mindset, as it has been a focus since before Hairston identified it so clearly in her 1982 speech. Digital spaces, reflective of this "new" mindset, are flexible, interactive, and multimodal spaces (Beach and Doerr-Stevens; Collins and Halverson) where "technical skills, media literacy, and even basic English literacy" (boyd 25) shape individual experiences. Contexts, audiences, and identities are so intertwined, it takes some expertise to navigate ever-shifting digital spaces (boyd).

While students are more accustomed to interacting with and through digital tools in their social sphere, employing those tools in academic tasks takes direct instruction (Graham and Perin; MacArthur). The paradigm shift Hairston described recognized this new mindset as best practice for teaching writing. The new shift is describing an increasingly essential set of skills for engaging in the global economy (Cope and Kalantzis). Navigating, communicating, and composing in digital spaces are skills our ATW students needed to learn as preservice teachers, and skills their future students will need to learn.

The power of a digital space as a learning space is in its connectedness. Ito et al. define three spheres of connected learning: peer supported, interest powered, and academically oriented. Connected learning "seeks to build communities and collective capacities for learning and opportunity" (8). A connected learning space is learner-driven, collaborative, interest-based, and equitable. It is a space that can decenter dominant language and ideology (Lee and Handsfield; Price-Dennis, "Developing"), reposition students as more agentive in their own writing processes (Lee et al.; Magnifico et al.), and put students more in control of their own learning (Beach and Doerr-Stevens; Collins and Halverson). It can be a tool for equity in the classroom (Collins and Halverson; Lee and Handsfield; Price-Dennis; Price-Dennis et al.). It is a digital affinity space, a way to situate learning in an academic sphere but outside the rigid confines of a traditional classroom, and a place to privilege student voices, passions, and thoughts. We'd hoped to provide such spaces in our exercises, allowing our students time to try out their own literacies and reposition themselves as both teachers and learners.

A digital space, we reasoned, affords the writing process three necessary elements: collaboration, recursion, and flexibility, with echoes of our writing scholarship's history: Hairston identifies these three elements as essential to her new

paradigm. Writing is a collaborative act between novice and expert as well as between novice and peer (Bridwell; Sommers; Witte). We think digital spaces provide a venue for all to interact. In a collaborative space, novices have the opportunity to try on the identities of writer, reader/audience, editor, critic, and expert (Daiute; Lee et al.; Pritchard and Morrow). They shift between each as the situation demands, just as they identify and manipulate the contexts, audiences, and identities of the complicated digital world (boyd; Pritchard and Morrow).

Because of these roles, as well as the asynchronous nature of digital collaborative spaces, the writing process becomes incredibly recursive. We've known that good writing is recursive and repetitive, requiring multiple passes with varied purposes (Elbow; Gallagher). It is the very paradigm that Hairston mentioned 40 years ago. The collaborative and flexible nature of digital spaces (boyd; Ito et al.; Lammers et al.) makes room for readers and writers to work together, take up varied identities, and take the time to revisit and revise.

RESEARCH IN ONE DIGITAL AND NON-DIGITAL SITE

"Approaches to Teaching Writing" allows preservice English teachers to explore writing practices and instruction through praxis. As Bonnie, Michael and Claudia planned our co-teaching, we wondered if we could attempt to reinterpret the writing conferences we had our students participate in during class time and reposition them in an online environment. We designed the class to push these preservice teachers in their ways of thinking about teaching writing and challenge their notions of "the way things are done." We asked our students to experience the writing process as a writer, reflect as a teacher, and think critically about where the process does and does not work for them. Using an online word-processing tool, we asked our students to *re-present* (Cantwell) writing conferences in two forms, two classroom scenarios we believe are realistic today: "flipped" classrooms, and hybrid learning environments. How might this new digital space influence the ways our preservice teacher/students talk about the texts in both forms: working simultaneously (*synchronous*), and working on their own time (*asynchronous*)? With the digital space mediating their conversations, how would they interact as readers/writers/teachers? Would they feel different about the process when online than when in person?

For both versions of the exercise, we used Office365 which offers shared online document editing. We managed the groups through the university's learning management system (LMS), so only our assigned group members had access to the document. For Exercise One, done asynchronously, we gave each group a writing sample from an anonymous 8th grade student who had been in a past class of a colleague in a suburban middle school. We provided basic student

information, and asked students to interact with the text as if they were the teacher in a writing conference. We gave them the week between class meetings to read and respond to the sample text, and also respond to their classmates' responses. What resulted were robust dialogues with the text and with one another without sharing the same space. The readers were physically disembodied, but their voices were actively engaged within the text. The asynchronous model lent focus to the utterances, with each word directed at the text, sometimes mediated by another comment.

Exercise Two, using the same groups as the first, used a personal essay by an anonymous high school student, submitted to a national writing contest. We asked the groups to comment about and annotate the essay in real-time during a class session. We wanted them to have a digital conversation about the text, to replace the verbal dialogue of a traditional revision group (some would call a workshop) with a dialogue in another shared document, not to have several disparate paragraphs from each participant. We wondered if the electronic (and "distant") features would encourage or discourage different kinds of responses. We simply wanted to see whether it was an efficient or effective kind of response.

Our students responded to this piece online in the same way they might respond on paper. They gave constructive criticism, highlighted areas of strength and ways to improve the essay. Students like Anna and Elise (all names are pseudonyms) imagined themselves as teachers speaking with the student, offering an in-person writing conference to continue the revision process. In Landon's response, the student writer remains imaginary. He talks about what he might say to the student rather than address the student directly, as Anna and Elise did. His comment begins with compliments, and the comment continues into areas of improvement, which he sees as a very teacherly response. Anna points directly to textual elements to start her response. All four examples indicate that the substance of the responses is not largely different from how these students might respond on paper:

> Anna: "Notice in this paragraph that you started every sentence with 'Video games ….' Try to work on sentence variation and start your other sentences with something else. If you meet with me I can help you come up with some other alternatives!"

> Monica: "It would make your argument even stronger if you also presented evidence for the other side of the argument."

> Elise: "Hmm, I'm not sure what this means. Let's talk about this idea and how it fits with your argument when we meet."

> Landon: "First off, I would congratulate the student on being so knowledgeable o about video games and how they can be incorporated into a student's learning. The student has a strong argument about why video games can help learning."

In Exercise Two we simulated an oral "workshop," wondering if the electronic (and "distant") features would encourage or discourage different kinds of responses. We simply wanted to see whether it was an efficient or effective kind of response:

> Lisa: "The first sentence of the last paragraph begins in a very complex and vivid way. However, as the sentence continues you begin to add too much into one sentence which obscures the initial image you've created for us. Try reading this sentence out loud?"

> Monica: "[to the author] I think clarifying the relationship with the father before jumping into the scene would be beneficial."

> Anna: "[W]ow I really thought this was a sweet piece at first and you made it turn so dark."

> Mia: "Anna, would you be saying that in a workshop? Rude!"

> Sofia: "I also had to reread certain sections multiple times because the point was somewhat lost in the descriptive language. I would also like to know why you chose driving. Was it the rite of passage to growing up? Or did you really feel that this moment was a time where you and your father could come back together?"

As in Exercise One, we see our students' conversation about the text with the author and with each other. The brief exchange between Anna and Mia shows their awareness of a new space, wondering if Anna's comment about the dark feeling she gets would have been made during an in-person workshop. Sofia, Monica, and Lisa all direct their comments toward the author. Monica adds the tag "to the author" to clarify this utterance from others directed at her classmates, a tag that would be unnecessary in person but does help clarify her intended audience in the digital space.

Exercise One asked our students to take on the role of teacher, responding to a completed and submitted piece of writing with the writer absent. Exercise Two asked the students to respond more like peers, in a workshop environment in which the assumption is that the writer has a chance to revise after the conversation. In both roles, we wondered how they'd mediate "response" through the digital tools. We were surprised that the substance of their comments aligned with what we would expect from a traditional workshop. The digital space did not seem to alter what our students said in response to the examples. However, we found a huge difference in the student attitudes towards the digital tools, their perceptions of themselves as teachers, and their willingness to adapt their practices varied greatly.

PRESERVICE TEACHERS CONFRONT A DIGITAL WRITING ENVIRONMENT

Recreating writing conferences in an online environment taught us a lot about college students, future English Language Arts teachers, and writing teachers, about their responses and reactions to including digital resources in the classroom. First, we were able to find the usual moments of struggle as our students shifted their identities from students to teachers. Second, we were able to witness students trying to adapt traditional paper-based processes to the new digital paradigm. Finally, we identified two groups: those who behaved more like assimilators, and those who were resistant to change. These binaries are not either/or, but areas of bend and shift. We construct them as such for the sake of discussion, comparison, and conversation.

Some of our students adapted more easily to the environment in which the interactions occurred. Others showed more resistance to a practice they themselves did not experience in school or that they found unnecessary. Upon discussion, the group was able to find pros and cons of both experiences, with students' preferences swinging back and forth like a pendulum on which one they preferred. There was one consensus: if you give a student a computer, assign a research task, and forget detailed instructions, you won't have a completed research task. Having future English teachers who grew up with technology—chatting with friends after school, as opposed to hanging out with them, having their own websites (blogs, social media profiles, school sites)—does not guarantee they will know what to do when given any task that involves a computer.

Teacher vs. Student Positionality: "What I Did is What I Would Have Liked as a Student"

In the process of constructing their responses, our students first had to identify their positionality. Were they students or teachers? In our view, they operated as both. Their discussions following the exercises revealed that what they liked and disliked as students receiving feedback strongly influenced their positionality as teachers. What they do, how, and why, as well as the way they assessed and responded to the assignment reflected their own preferences as student writers receiving feedback. Elise explained: "For me as a student, it is intimidating to see a lot of comments without a cohesive statement. So, trying to give cohesive feedback is something I try to do when giving online feedback." Elise often situated herself as a professional, having worked as a tutor at the University's Writing Center. Here, she leads with the student experience and uses it to frame response

practices. Elise feels intimidated by a volume of comments, so prefers to give fewer but more substantial ones on papers.

Monica's remark on this topic was straightforward: "What I did is what I would have liked as a student, so at least I commented with positive things. It's [getting positive comments] been one of the most beneficial experiences I've ever had, I'm actually doing it in my classroom…." Like Elise, Monica uses her student experience as foundation for her instructional practices, and is aware of that connection. Monica feels that getting positive feedback is most beneficial, and so her responses in both exercises identified instances where the writer does something well, and where Monica as reader and respondent makes connections with the writer.

Both Elise and Monica avoided giving direct criticism in the exercises, demonstrating heavy influence from their student experience; they find themselves collapsing their student and teacher identities, and so do we. Though Elise is experienced as a tutor, her remarks during the exercise and in discussion show that she still holds a strong student position. Similarly, Monica bases praxis on her previous experience as a student. Exercises like ours challenge preservice teachers to consider "praxis," recognizing the links between old "analogue" habits and experimenting with new "digital" ones.

Paper vs Screen: "I'd Write a Lot Less on Paper. You Have More Freedom on the Screen"

Some students preferred face-to-face and paper responses over digital interactions, even if they acknowledged both have their pros and cons. Those that are "Pro Paper" and handwritten comments emphasize how comfortable they feel with tradition and don't see the need to change what has worked for decades. Below, two of our students make direct comparisons between analogue and digital practices, indicating what they prefer about handwriting comments:

> Lisa: "[I]n the digital version it's hard to show or highlight or circle, so I wrote a bit less but if I had an actual paper, I'd circle, and mark, and write, it'd be easier to have it in front of me."

> Julia: "[On screen writing] it felt a little more I don't know … aggressive. It feels like once something it's typed out and … in there … written feels more informal, more personal. I have [online] papers. I have not read comments because they freak me out so much: I'm terrified to check those. I don't know why that is … I get really excited when I get handed a manuscript on paper and I see the comments written in and where they are. The computer is so much more intimidating for me."

Both students discuss barriers they faced in the exercises. Lisa found the digital tool cumbersome and difficult to use, which led to a less robust interaction

with the text. Julia, on the other hand, seemed to find no issue in using the tool. However, she had a strong and unexpected emotional reaction. The screen felt "aggressive" and more formal, more imposing to interact with as a student. As she is thinking of herself as a teacher, Julia still has that same emotional response. Her fear of the digital responses seems to hold her back from using the digital tools in our exercises.

While many of our students expressed a more Pro Paper perspective, several were "Pro Screen." These students jumped at the opportunity to try a different approach to providing a response in a different space:

> Mia: "I'd write a lot less [on paper]. You have more freedom [on the screen]."

> Anna: "In my class for my practicum, they would put all the assignments in the classroom in a like Google doc and they were able to watch through the documents really fast and if the students were stuck they [the instructors] could like offer support really quickly and easily so I actually felt like it was easier to communicate."

Where Lisa experienced restriction, Anna felt ease and practicality. Where Julia felt fear and apprehension, Mia felt freedom. Anna also speaks to the trajectory of modern classrooms, moving towards fully digital learning environments. Anna sees digital literacy as a strength, or even a potential necessity, in a future classroom, and Mia indicates a preference for the openness of a digital space, one that promises flexibility. Anna and Mia's contrasting experiences highlight this binary, but there were participants who emphasized the importance of combining both methods for the benefit of the students. They claim respecting traditions while adapting new, and not so new, technologies is possible:

> Julia: "I really like workshopping, I like when there's several students on another one's student paper and having conversations, I like those conversations; but one proof this is that we can have those conversations without the student feeling nervous, because some students may not feel like talking face to face with this other student, or feel like they might be judged, this gives that kind of anonymity where you can type with the screen barrier."

> Landon: "I also, personally, with online feedback like this, I think it is more beneficial later on in the process. Because the problem with this feedback is that it is not a conversation with the writer."

Even after expressing apprehension and fear related to receiving feedback on screen, Julia recognizes the potential benefit for other students. Though not a part of her praxis yet, Julia seems to identify a way to incorporate digital tools. Landon already sees a way to blend analogue and digital spaces across time. Contending that the digital feedback is not a conversation with the student, Landon

advocates for a face-to-face discussion early, with a digital space taking over later in the revision process. Many of our students believe that digital platforms can be incorporated as part of the writing and revision processes, but they don't want to abandon their analogue practices.

Assimilation vs Resistance: "I Think a Lot of English People Are … Averse a Little Bit to Technology, and That's Scary to Me … "

For our students, accessing the document was not hard. But having not received detailed instructions, many of them resisted the work, not knowing "exactly" what to do. And there lies the dichotomy: our students own the schemata and problem-solving skills to know how to work the computers and digital platforms without any inconvenience, but we could see that they had not developed enough critical thinking skills to break free from traditional ways of knowing and doing. They were still working through the same paradigm shift Hairston identified in 1982. Those students who resisted the new method of revision found three barriers: lack of (perceived) instruction, confusion with the tool, and clashing epistemology. While the first two barriers may be overcome with experience and time, the third poses a pedagogical conundrum: how do we push preservice teachers to critically analyze what "worked" for them as students and adapt it to a quickly changing classroom environment?

Lisa: "I wanted more of a directive on how you wanted us to comment or what specifically you wanted us to comment on." Lisa exemplifies the first barrier, where our students felt a lack of guidance. We were surprised by this response. The experiments both asked students to respond to writing, a task they had all done before as high school and college students. Was this confusion a result of the perception of this task as an assignment and the desire to do the assignment "right"? The student positionality is very present in the construction of the barrier, the desire to do the work the correct way. For our preservice teachers who are still working on identifying themselves as teachers, this barrier will likely be diminished in time as that identity becomes more concrete:

> Carl: "Can I just say that I did that [write longer comments at the end of the document] because I don't know how to use comments on OneDrive?"

> Julia: "I couldn't figure out how to do comments … so it was nice for me just to read through it and be like, generally overall, this is what I liked, this is what I didn't like…."

Carl and Julia, like many of their classmates, expressed frustration with using the tool. Though we gave a tutorial in class about how to add comments and other ways of responding to the given text, our instructions were evidently insufficient

for many students. This is a valuable moment, however, in identifying the drawbacks of the assumption of digital nativity. Now in their early 20s, they grew up in a technology-saturated space. These students would fall into the commonly accepted definition of "digital natives," yet they are unable to use their nativity to figure out a relatively simple online tool. Assuming that any student can operate a tool without instruction risks making the tool a barrier. When the tool is a barrier, the entire process is disrupted. Along with these correctable barriers, there were instances of complete resistance to technology, of epistemological differences that may preclude the inclusion of technology in future classrooms for these teachers:

> Monica: "If everything else is digital, why not have an organic class: no computers, no phones, 'let's talk….' I don't know … I'm also more non-tech, like I understand technology, but I prefer not to use it…."

> Mara: "I absolutely agree, I think the writing, or the English classroom could be a breather from all the tech in the classroom. Nothing is better than actually speaking to each other, especially when it comes to writing."

Both Monica and Mara describe a belief that technology tools like those used in our experiments are hindrances in the classroom, that analogue ways of doing these tasks are and always will be "superior." Monica contends that any inclusion of digital tools or spaces is inorganic. Mara extends that thinking, arguing for a "breather" from technology. Both presume that in-person and analogue is organic and, therefore, superior.

Not everyone accepted this organic classroom idea. Kate claimed: "I think a lot of English majors are … averse a little bit to technology, and that's scary to me … but we live in a time where technology is everywhere, but like, we do have a responsibility, as technology continues to grow to teach our children to be digitally literate, we have to … we have to be able to use this …." Many of our students claimed we "owe it to the children" to help them become digitally literate. Some saw it as a "there's no going back" approach: Kate, for example, declared: "I also want to say that while it feels weird to me, I also grew up with pen and paper response exclusively, and I think for a student it's not as weird to see feedback digitally like that … maybe it's more what they expect … I mean from a student perspective …." Perspectives such as Monica's and Mara's limit the potential of teaching praxis by limiting the pool of resources. The work of teaching and learning writing has been stagnant since Maxine Hairston identified a tidal shift, but the praxis has yet to catch up. In the face of yet another shift, teacher educators and their students must use digital tools toward their potential.

ANOTHER SHIFTING PARADIGM

As all English educators know, the transition from being a student to being a teacher is hard. The difference, as one of us tells advisees, "is a lot of kids." Our students learn to be in charge, and "in front of" as opposed to "among" a class. The performance of pedagogy is expanding to include a digital stage, a new venue and a new set of practices. Responding to student writing is a rhetoric of performance itself. New writing teachers need practice, theory, and partners in order to do it with confidence. Our efforts under the pressure of completion sometimes silence such spaces in our pedagogies. Our exercises opened a door into such spaces, allowing students an opportunity to explore digital pedagogy. We believed that students who are in college right now are "digital natives," but our preservice teachers indicated otherwise. Comments and actions in the exercises demonstrated that we are still negotiating our own paradigm shifts: from students to teachers, from paper to screen, from resistance to assimilation. We have learned that preservice teachers:

1. Still need directives and instruction when it comes to digital platforms,
2. prefer "old fashioned" pen and paper and face to face responses for writing instruction, both as students and teachers,
3. are willing to adapt technology in the classroom for the sake of innovation and the students' benefit.

These three lessons come together in one statement from Julia: "I am a bit of a techno-phobe, and the first thing I thought about when schools went 1:1 with Chromebooks: 'Does this mean I'll grade papers online?' I prefer to read on paper, respond and give feedback on paper. This is something we all must contend with in the digital age. It felt permanent and nerve-wracking." While she is exercising her teacher positionality, she also struggles with taking paper practices onto the screen. In most of her statements, Julia showed a strong preference for traditional practices. Her preference is less resistance and more hesitance and fear, as Julia indicates she knows the necessity of making the transition, but it feels so "permanent and nerve-wracking" that pushing through the barriers is difficult. We believe that preservice teachers are willing and able to assimilate into the new digital culture. To do so, they require instruction and support. Our students may be "digital natives," but they aren't digital experts. They may be familiar with the tools, but they (and we) still need guidance to make the most out of those tools and to assimilate them into traditional practice. Those who have had success in the old paradigm are forced to deal with new colonizers, the digital spaces and tools that are invading, taking over, forcing us to choose between resisting, assimilating, or both. The key is that we have, in fact, had success in the old paradigm.

We have chosen to be English teachers, so it's not surprising to see confusion in the face of the shifting paradigm. It's difficult to make the choice to leave a position of success. It is incumbent upon teacher educators to adapt our practices in order to give room for preservice teachers to expand themselves.

The paradigm is still shifting; it has been since 1982. And so our toolkit for response to writing continues to shift as our teaching writing paradigm shifts—and we need, perhaps, to consider it as we work with new students and new practices in our post-pandemic world.

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