Creative Writing in the Digital Age

Theory, practice, and pedagogy

Edited by

MICHAEL DEAN CLARK,

TRENT HERGENRADER, AND

JOSEPH REIN

Contents

2

Creative writing in the age of synapses

Graeme Harper

Making the change

The world changed, many people noticed, but not many reacted. Further focusing on such a comment will certainly appear accusatory, and yet I will. Alongside changes in ways of reading, the writing and distribution of works of creative writing changed. Many people noticed, but only a very small percentage of those teaching creative writing reacted to these changes. Because of that, much in the teaching of creative writing continues to address a predigital world rather than the environment in which we now live, learn, and teach. Fortunately, some of us have noticed this has happened and are beginning to do something about it.

The specific phenomenon we need to target today clearly owes its origins to digitalism. It has arisen out of digitalism to be our contemporary *modus operandi*, the ethos of our era, our guide, and in many ways, our gift. We can refer to this phenomenon as "synapticism."

Synaptic technologies are those contemporary technologies that support reciprocal human experiences, not material manifestations, of our human presence in the world. That is, they are technologies of action and experience, not primarily technologies associated with materialism. Depending on the specific device, these contemporary technologies were born when the sometimes immediate and sometimes gradual changeover from analog to

digital technologies generated opportunities for more direct, accessible, domesticated, and reciprocal human connections (or what can be called "interconnection").

Certainly, such synaptic technologies *can* produce material results; that is, they can be used to produce artifacts (in the case of creative writing, such artifacts as novels, poems, scripts). But these technologies are not, in essence, about materiality. Rather, they are about the human experiences they initiate, support, and empower. They empower these in interconnected ways. So, for example, texting on a cell phone does not primarily produce words on a small screen. True, this material element is obvious and undeniably relevant. But it is secondary to the cell phone's support for an experience of reciprocal human connectedness, often combining this with a sense of immediacy and almost always involving a personal and interactive conversation between persons.

The developed world in the twenty-first century is one of technological interfaces with human experiences. Synaptic technologies, or what might thus be also called *experience technologies*, produce and support opportunities for human interaction and interconnection, well beyond the local or regional geography of direct physical contact, at a pace of experience and level of convenience never before accomplished. Indeed, include here the technologies of the cell phone and the internet; in fact, include all those contemporary digital technologies that offer experiential opportunities. They each might also initiate and/or support material results, but that is not the primary consequence.

As the name suggests, synapticism involves a network of reciprocal connections or junctions, and synaptic technologies are those that allow such connections to operate. Synapses are openings or bridges. They are nodes in a network. These networks are not based in linearity. By being structured in a nonlinear fashion, networks of this kind support and both literally and metaphorically encourage nonlinear thinking and acting.

Digitalism, as we most often consider it today, is associated specifically with the arrival and rapid spread of digital media technologies toward the latter part of the twentieth century. This contemporary instance is not the only instance of the digital in human history. The digital has a wider definition and the digital technologies we associate with our contemporary world are distinct to our era. That said, digitalism generally means the bringing together of discrete interrelated entities rather than a continuous connected linear flow in one direction. It involves joining together to create interconnected experiences and the opportunity for nonlinearity. So, for example, digital sound technologies produce less distortion because an increase in capacity can be addressed by adding more data units at points in a sequence, whereas analog sound technologies rely on maintaining a continuous linear flow, and thus the likelihood of distortion rises with increases in the size of material to be stored.

Nonlinearity means an opportunity to combine more or interconnect greater, and to do so successfully. That these additions might not be in a single line of connectivity is exactly what the definitions of nonlinearity and interconnection suggest. But there are other things here as well.

In creative writing pedagogy, imagine a set of activities, encouragements, and alignments that were not fixed on an end result—that is, actions that relate to the learning of ways, modes, understandings, and relationships; in essence a creative writing pedagogy that is about the interconnectedness of human action. Whereas linear creative writing pedagogics predominantly rely on notions of material completion, achievement defined by reaching a material end point, nonlinear pedagogics can produce a wider variety of results in the area of creative writing understanding and knowledge. In this way, nonlinearity makes more of the aspects that all of us involved in creative writing have always recognized. Nonlinearity does not necessarily reduce the goal-directed, or teleological, nature of much of our human action. Humans often act with goals in mind, even if those goals can occasionally be short term, badly conceived, or in the realm of the unconscious. But nonlinearity highlights human actions that linear-based technologies couldn't easily highlight.

First, nonlinearity affirms that teleology in creative writing relates both to extrinsic and intrinsic ends and values. Extrinsic ends and values in that the goal might still be to produce final artifacts, whether poems, plays, novels, or some other end or final result. Intrinsic in that the actions that make up creative writing are valuable goals in themselves, that is, the explorations and understanding that come from such exercises. Any teacher of creative writing (and I say this based solely on anecdotal evidence, but with a degree of confidence) will confirm that intrinsic goals in creative writing have value, whether during the production of drafts, writing of pieces of exploratory but unfinished material, reciprocal communications with family or friends about works-in-progress, investigations through doodles or sketches, diary entries, or any and all of our students' actions, thoughts, and imaginative engagements.

Unfortunately, it is the extrinsic goals of creative writing, not the intrinsic ones, that have been promoted and most discussed culturally in the modern period—the period in which the sale of products emerging out of creative writing became tantamount, that is, primarily from the eighteenth century to the later twentieth century. During this time, the intrinsic goals were often ignored, downplayed, misunderstood, or misrepresented. Because of this, we saw such things as the elevation of the notion that to understand creative writing you had to read certain kinds of written works most often defined as "literature," that you had to study these to be able to value and

ultimately understand the actions of undertaking creative writing generally, and equally that your creative endeavors were most worthy if you produced certain kinds of finished works and less worthy if you did not. We might ask whether this is a misrepresentation or a misunderstanding of its intrinsic nature, or both. Additionally, we might ask if my assessment is overly harsh because material results *are* of course part of the undertaking of creative writing and so, in that sense, not extrinsic. Nevertheless, such value judgments often had something of the extrinsic about them, being located in the material artifact rather than in the undertaking and experience of creative writing itself.

When teaching creative writing, many of us continue to emphasize reaching a final material condition more than the intrinsic aspects of the practice. It would not be unfair to say that many still teach as if a final material object is paramount and the intrinsic, though so often recognized, valued, and discussed (even if only informally), is left to occupy a liminal space. These teachers often clearly recognize the intrinsic but cannot attend to it in their teaching or in their declarations of the learning outcomes of this teaching. The reason for that relates as much to the impact of physicalism on contemporary education as it does to any criticism of those creative writing teachers. There is so often a stated obligation to produce tangible, measurable, and fixed final results.

Secondly, both digitalism and creative writing involve multiple levels of human engagement and action, not only action and artifacts we can see but the movements of memory and individual writer disposition: further too, the interaction of immediate stimuli with plains of reference that draw from previous experience or even projected experience founded on personality or dream or cognitive leaps of faith. Such a highlighting makes inroads into recognizing the relationship between the creative and the critical and into seeing these as interconnected modes of human engagement with the world. In other words, creativity and critical thought are reciprocally connected, more like each other than they are separate from each other.

Synaptic technologies have thus supported a significant and exciting challenge to the narrow thrust of the modern period. If space has been traversed by digital communication and time has been challenged—or, in the sense declared by Henri Bergson a century ago,[1] *real* time has been better approached and understood—has the condition of the world thus been irreversibly altered? Certainly, space can no longer be considered in the same way when virtual space has become as real to human sight and hearing as physical space? Equally, real time is surely no longer the same when the interconnected digital world of communication runs 24 hours a day in every time zone of the world and simultaneously we can visit these—whether by tablet computer, cell phone, or however else—and be present there, elsewhere, in some other time, while remaining in our own time, in our own chronology. Surely, these situations are different to those experienced prior to the end of the twentieth century, prior to our contemporary synaptic technological period.

Imagine more actively addressing this as an analog both for the undertaking of creative writing and for creative writing pedagogies: so, rather than fixed points of entry and determined material results, interconnectedness, which can be defined as reciprocal connectedness. The learner and the teacher thus enter their conversation as an exchange that is bound only by seeking out some forward movement in understanding. Imagine if this is borne also, as is the world of synaptic technologies generally, on exploring and contextualizing the experience of making works. Imagine exiting this conversation (if only because of the limitations of formal educational semesters or years) with results defined nevertheless according to a network of discoveries. For example,

- Student 1 improved his or her knowledge of modes of patterning in prose;

- Student 2 came to a greater understanding of structure and form;

- Student 3 advanced his or her overall work in relation to voice and tone;

- Student 4 improved compositional chronology, reconsidering productively the sequence of his or her writing process;

- Student 5 reexamined assumptions about the audience for his or her finished works.

And so on. If perhaps we have not seen a change in the properties of space and time from the point of view of physics, mathematics, and mechanics, we have certainly seen a change in space and time from the point of view of human perception, human ideals, and human attitudes. Surely there should therefore be an aligned transformation in our creative writing pedagogies.

Creative writing and synapses

What Daniel Bell[2] and others described as "post-industrial society," arriving as it did toward the end of the twentieth century, made much of a refocusing of societies to highlight both creativity and knowledge. Creative writing has always involved a heightened sense of both these and incorporated synaptic ways of acting and thinking upon them. Logically, then, we are here at the beginning of a time in which creative writing will more likely be included in general discussions of human knowledge, more regularly, and with the opportunity for its practices to be knowledgeably explored and

better understood. Of course, I mean the inclusion and understanding of the actions that constitute creative writing not just as recognition of the final artifacts that emerge from it, which has been a constant of the modern period.

There is absolutely no evidence that the kind of inscription that writing involves, and the activities we undertake to produce these inscriptions, is undertaken by any other creature on the planet. Writing is clearly and entirely human. As a species, we have thus spent much time on the relationship between our spoken and written communications. The spoken word has been valued for such things as its immediacy, spontaneity, and ability to address changing needs and the fluidity of daily activities, while the written word has been valued, very often, for its persistence over time, solidity, definitiveness, and often formality. Creative writing has been awkwardly placed in this relationship, not because its modes of inscription have been different from those of other writing—largely, they are not—but because of the willingness of creative writing to unsettle writing intentions and attitudes.

Creative writing is all about writing released from conditions of formality, accuracy, clarity, agreed address, or aspects of recognizable voice. To say this could be seen to be disingenuous, because creative writing does often deal with accuracy and clarity, and its artifacts do have aspects of formality about them. But the point is that the intention of any act of creative writing is not to firm up convention but to put convention into a form of relief, to challenge, even in the most conservative of outcomes of creative writing, our expectations of something, of form, of content, of structure, of outlook, of voice, and more.

Thus, creative writing has always by necessity been an interconnected synaptic activity, one that looks to associate multiple plains of reference, the literal and the metaphoric, the current and the historical or the future: a human activity that seeks junctions and conjunctions, bringing together emotions with observations, speculations with discoveries, the personal and individual with the public and cultural. All art does these things to an extent. However, creative writing is the only art that does these things and uses writing as its primary tool.

Given the significance of written communication in our perpetual human sense of the world, even that unique feature of creative writing alone would make such a practice a likely highlight of the digital age. But if we usher in a period in which creativity and new forms of knowledge—the key components of post-industrialism—are socially, economically, and personally heightened, then the advantageous position of creative writing—with its eclecticism, its conjoining of the personal and the cultural, its history of incorporation into the industries of publishing, entertainment, the media and performance—in relation to our age becomes abundantly clear.

Finally, teaching synaptically

The period in which we live—which could even now be called the "postdigital age" if we are to take the technologies of the past 10 years to have actively refined and built upon digitalism—has intensified space and time transformations. It has made nonlinearity a literal and metaphoric guide to human understanding and interconnection. Thus, we have an increase in reciprocal connections relating to individual and group empowerment and choice, nodes of access and support for experiences that often arrive instantly and dwell in personal as well as cultural space. Such experiences go well beyond immediate surroundings, well beyond a sequential narrative of day-to-day. They give a stronger ontological voice to the conditions of creative writing that those who engage with creative writing have long known to be real and important.

In light of all this, if it is to advance or even to be truly relevant, creative writing teaching must evolve to embrace the condition of our synaptic world, in the many instances where it has not done so already. Doing so will result in improved understanding, as well as greater learner and teacher empowerment. In this, the intrinsic teleology of creative writing must be brought to the fore, so that the practice is understood as human action and the artifacts it produces are understood as evidence of a distinct human practice. Because creative writers spend something like ninety percent of their time engaged in the actions that constitute creative writing, consider then a creative writing class in the synaptic world where most of the interactions are related to action. Consider such things as defining creative writerly choice according to the selection of techniques and applications, not according to the judgments beginning with final artifacts; undertaking comparative explorations of sequential action, what might often be called the compositional components of drafting; and, using our interconnected world to explore action and response between writer and audience.

Final artifacts produced by creative writers are often things of great aesthetic worth and beauty; they might capture in the form of a written artwork aspects of human life, existence, belief, and understanding that touch us very deeply and inform us greatly. But these are not creative writing: they are some of its evidence. Because of the reflective alignment between creative writing and digitalism, creative writing has never been so obviously something that we humans use to explore and articulate our sense of life and the world. To teach in our age, to teach synaptically, we must:

1   Keep in focus the intrinsic value and goals of creative writing as well as the extrinsic situations, factors, and representations of creative writing.

...courses that do not rely on final artifacts to confirm the level of achievement and the level of knowledge, but rather that see those artifacts as part of the evidence trail of writerly action.

3. Recall that digital technologies as we know them are distinct to our age, but that digitalism is not. The particular kinds of digital technologies that have brought about our contemporary sense are technologies promoting, supporting, and developing experiences.

4. Know that creative writing, too, is experience and the artifacts that emerge during and at the end of any instance of creative writing capture only a relatively small portion of the total experiences that ensued during the creative writing. Teach to the experiences. Raise the potential for seeing how our action informs, and the evidence of that action and any artifacts that emerge from it.

5. Recognize the multiple layers of experience, observation, and knowledge that creative writing involves—not least in its bringing together of creative and critical understanding. Creative writing draws from all of human discourse and engagement in the world.

6. Teach with synapses in mind. We know that all creative writers have potential avenues of exploration in front of them, and that digital technologies have opened up the possibility of synapticism and the volume of reciprocal human connections. Teach to empower the creation of conjunctions and meeting places, of opportunities to create bridges that might draw into play new possibilities in their work.

7. Teach to emphasize the role of particular writing situations that define creative solutions. Whether in relative freeform explorations, or whether the final results are being explored as end points presented with elements of formal expectation, teach to show that, just as in our reciprocal interactions with others, the situation defines the solution. Many times a writing situation can be approached with any number of solutions.

8. Avoid the idea that the classroom—whether physical or virtual—defines the parameters of action. Creative writing is action beyond and across boundaries. Such is the nature of the creative, but such also is the nature of the digital (nonlinear and connective, elements brought together for a purpose), and such boundary crossings only assist in developing critical understanding.

9. Finally, allow for the learning and teaching of creative writing to take the routes that action defines. In the digitally informed world, where we can create synapses with which we personally and culturally engage, we need to encourage individual and group learning of a kind that best uses and encourages synaptic choices. It is true that twentieth century mass education brought down many conditions of conformity, but in the twenty-first century world, we can see that technologies have given us opportunities for individuality even in this mass education world, and where better, indeed, than the learning and teaching of creative writing to see that individuality flourish and reassert itself?

And so, here we are. The world changed, many people noticed, and we moved on; we changed too. But in the case of creative writing, we changed to return to the core values and goals we have always known but have not always been so wonderfully galvanized to pursue in formal education. Creative writing, which has for so long been a human activity of considerable significance, flourishes in our colleges and universities. Creative writing in our age, in this age of synapses, will grow further as human practice, be understood more, and flourish further. For those of us who teach creative writing, we are entering an era of immeasurable opportunity to elevate the successes of our students.

Notes

1. Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946. Print. In this work, among other places, Henri Bergson differentiates between mathematical time or scientific time and real time, and notes that real time is continuous and indivisible, whereas scientific time is divided into units and measures and does not reflect reality, as such. It could be said that the digital challenged scientific time by making the indivisible and continuous nature of time more visible.

2. Bell, Daniel. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974. Print. Bell and others speculating on the future rise of postindustrialism spoke of ways in which the "knowledge economy" would outstrip economies based in manufacturing and thus the production of goods. Creative writing, combining human experience with some tradable artifactual outcomes and drawing on a range of knowledge and creative actions, fits well in such a postindustrial world, as depicted by Bell, and as more recently defined in discussions by John Howkins of the "creative economy" (in Howkins, John, *Creative Economy: How People Make Money From Ideas*, London: Penguin, 2013. Print.). In some ways, creative writing offers a "service" to individuals and communities in terms of self-expression, communication, and individual and communal empowerment; in other ways, it contributes to an economy of a certain type of knowledge exchange in formal education and elsewhere.

3 Ibid., 36.

4 Monson, Ander. *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2010. Print.

5 Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011: 12. Print.

6 Mayers, Timothy. *(Re)writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*. Pittsburgh University Press, 2005. Print.

7 Dawson, Paul. *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

8 Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. Print.

9 Dawson, *Creative Writing*, 109.

10 Mayers, *(Re)writing Craft*, 34.

11 Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 15.

12 Ibid., 25.

13 Ibid., 8.

14 Hayles, *Writing Machines*, 15.

15 Ibid., 43.

16 Ibid., 45.

17 Shipka, *Toward a Composition*, 12.

4

Concentration, form, and ways of (digitally) seeing

Anna Leahy and Douglas Dechow

The dangers of going digital

In *Fiction Writer's Review*, I expressed interest in using digital tools in my creative writing courses but had concerns: "Some initial studies in brain science indicate that digital modes may be at odds with some habits of mind—curiosity, concentration—I'm working to cultivate."[1] Poet Jane Hirshfield writes, in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, "Every good poem . . . begins, that is, in the body and mind of concentration. . . . By concentration, I mean a particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open."[2] Hirshfield goes on to say, "Difficulty itself may be a path toward concentration—expended effort weaves us into a task, and successful engagement, however laborious, becomes also a labor of love."[3] I wondered: how could digital modes foster concentration, not distraction? How could a device that offers us a list of resources tailored not only to the few key words we type but also to our previous preferences encourage difficulty or effort that draws us into our work?

Poet Louise Glück, in *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*, writes the following about a poem's agenda: "not simply to record the actual but to *continuously* create the sensation of *immersion* in the actual. . . . Where the gaze *is held*, voice, or response, begins."[4] Glück isn't worried about

the digital world here, but when I read her words more than 20 years after their publication, I'm worried that digital technology discourages *continuous* creation, *immersion*, and attention being *held*. After all, I'm tempted to check email or Facebook as I'm revising this paragraph.

"We are welcoming frenziedness into our souls,"[5] writes Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. His personal experience echoes my own and what I observe in students:

> Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface on a Jet Ski.[6]

Carr also summarizes research that indicates students increasingly struggle to read whole books and often skip around on a page instead of reading left to right and top to bottom, and I've observed these behaviors in classes that encourage students to use their laptops or phones.

Of course, the computer allows us to do, with greater ease, the things as writers we were already doing, namely, drafting and revising. Neuroplasticity allows repeated habits to become deeply ingrained, replacing neural paths and rewiring us. That would be great if we always made improvements, or if it were easy to revert to the old paths when new ones proved bad for us.

At first, I didn't know enough about other digital possibilities to be convinced that they were all for the good. Aren't poets supposed to be scuba divers in the sea of language? Aren't poets supposed to read every word—and *want* to read and appreciate every word? When I thought about digital—the laptop or iPad, the software, the screen—I did not initially recognize how it might fit the creative writing pedagogy I find to be invigorating and personalized. I had to rethink my assumptions about the role of digital tools without undermining my values as a teacher and a poet.

One of the texts that helped me think about going digital from the point of view of a teacher and a pedagogy scholar was N. Katherine Hayles's *Writing Machines*. There she writes,

> As the vibrant new field of electronic textuality flexes its muscle, it is becoming overwhelmingly clear that we can no longer afford to ignore the material basis of literary production. Materiality of the artifact can no longer be positioned as a subspecialty within literary studies.[7]

I know that digital modes cannot be ignored; I use them myself. More importantly, Hayles's stance resonates with my sense that, though the rise of electronic texts may at least temporarily threaten the entrenched practices of mainstream publishing, the book in poetry has long been a material artifact—something handled and possessed, sometimes an art object—that presents a way to read poems that we do not want to lose.

Moreover, the rise of online literary journals and digital publishing creates the likelihood that each mode will push the other. The medium for our words—spacing, fonts, visual shape, heard sounds—has long been important to poets; so poets can benefit from taking into account differences between print and digital modes when making formal choices. "To construct an environment," Hayles says, "is, of course, to anticipate and structure the user's interaction with it."[8] She's talking about digital, but that's true in print as well. Digital creates new opportunities for poets, especially in terms of form and creating a variety of reading experiences, and, as Hayles suggests, it makes us take print seriously anew as well. While initially unsure how I would adjust my own teaching, I began to see that poets could be the biggest winners in the digital world and the leaders in figuring out how to make digital projects part and parcel of the humanities.

Matching digital projects to the goals of creative writing pedagogy

Books—at one time a new technology—haven't ruined literature. I draft and revise on a laptop (as well as on paper), and I don't store in my own memory every tidbit that ends up in my poems. As poet Dean Young writes in *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction*, "No doubt about it, since the dawn of creation, things have been getting worse. As long as I've been around, literature has been getting finished by television, itself, cheap gas, movies, itself, DVDs, the Internet, itself."[9] I had to try digital in my classes before I could dismiss it as not useful. After all, isn't poetry too often dismissed because of misconceptions that it's not useful or is beyond understanding? As with music or films, almost anyone finds a poem that moves them deeply or, at least, that is fun to read. Maybe, I figured, it was the same with digital. Maybe it was a great opportunity.

Art is not a static thing, and Illinois Poet Laureate Kevin Stein is a poet who doesn't think technology is the next falling sky. In his book *Poetry's Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age*, Stein writes,

> The advent of digital technology has given birth to video and new media poetries both created on and received via the computer. Each bristles with revolutionary fervor. These electronic progeny aspire to resuscitate

and sound but also by thrusting verse culture into new potentialities of awareness.[10]

The culture and so-called literary marketplace have been changing, and the creative writing teacher should take into account shifts of the past few decades when orchestrating courses. Incorporating audio, in fact, might be a reclaiming of poetry's origins prior to the book.

In addition, Katharine Haake, in an essay called "Against Reading," puts us on the spot pedagogically. "It's not enough," she writes,

to assert that writers are readers first, or even to supply exhaustive models or extensive bibliographies. All such work serves to reinforce the choices of the teacher and hence the perpetuation of his or her aesthetic biases, and while it can be argued that this is exactly what teaching should consist of, it seems that we better serve our students when we teach, in addition, the dilemma itself, *what it means to choose,* and train them, as we trained ourselves, in developing their own reading strategies that work to enrich and challenge their writing proclivities and interests.[11]

Teaching students that they have choices—that in writing each line of a poem, they make large and small choices, whether or not they are thinking about those choices at the time—is central to my pedagogical approach. That's why, when students do in-class exercises, they read results aloud to hear how each student's choices panned out differently and to notice similarities that may be clichés. That's part of why I require revision, so that students understand choices they made in drafting and consider options. A digital assignment can allow students to challenge their proclivities and become aware of choices, perhaps introducing options they would not otherwise consider.

By the time I was considering whether to include digital projects in my courses, I had recently been published in an online journal[12] and had provided an MP3 audio file of me reading the poem. The latter, though part of so-called new media, seems also a return to poetry as an oral and aural tradition. In addition, I had become editor of an online journal.[13] I was a digital poet in some respects and felt a new responsibility to prepare my students for this milieu. As more literary journals move to or add online formats— both because it trades rising printing costs for more easily rationalized and sometimes less expensive software upgrade costs and because it offers new possibilities for design and audience—venues for poetry publication

will likely be open to and even encourage poetic forms that take advantage of new media.

In deciding how to incorporate digital projects into my poetry workshop, I faced important practical–theoretical questions. How can students be trained well enough with the software to become adept but maintain focus on—and spend their time—writing poems? How might students take advantage—in both positive and negative senses, both consciously and unconsciously—of digital iterations of their writing? What is the relationship among content, form, and formatting, especially when a seemingly new kind of formatting—in addition to images, audio, or video—might distract students from the language itself and make them think clichéd or thoughtless writing looks better than it is? What specific opportunities (e.g. video) and limitations (e.g. font choice) affect the poem in a new medium?

These questions led me to think about which goals of my courses could be encouraged by digital projects. A high priority in my courses is for students to try various techniques and approaches, both in drafting and in revision. Young writes, "The sublime coincides with the ridiculous, babble with referent, the witnessed phenomena with the combustion of name in song of dazzling appeal, of play."[14] *Play!* Yes, that's how I've written about creativity and pedagogy in a recent essay called "Let's Begin in Delight":

Creativity depends upon improvisational thinking, which we tend to call originality, in which one thing leads to another in ways that often look or feel random or chaotic but are actually organized toward discovery. Improvisational thinking and the discovery that emerges depend upon curiosity and serendipity, which work hand in hand.[15]

Going digital, it seemed to me, had great potential for shaking up students' expectations and encouraging improvisational—though informed and rigorous—thinking. After all, Young reminds us, "IT'S OKAY TO ENJOY WRITING!"[16]

Because I had a lot of questions, I turned to my university's Office of Academic Technology[17] for advice. The two experts there oriented me to Wordpress[18] and to Prezi[19] so that I could decide whether and how to incorporate such technology. More importantly, the director agreed to use two of my class periods—one for each technology—to train my students in ways that worked with the course assignments. This work can be done in isolation by the instructor, but the support I received made it much easier for me to try major assignments in my workshop and to do that sooner rather than later, even if that meant I wasn't too far ahead of my students—who may be called digital natives, but who are almost entirely Internet users and not digital creators.[20]

Blogging in creative writing courses

Over the previous two years, I'd experimented with a class blog in an undergraduate course and with individual private blogs in a small graduate workshop. I'd ironed out a few problems, such as how to keep track of posts, in these pilots. By the Spring of 2013, I was ready for a major blogging assignment and determined that its primary goal was to establish a consistent writing habit and, thereby, plenty of material for revision and workshopping. I required each student to post a draft of a poem every day for a month on an individual blog started for this purpose and to become a commenter on several peer draft-a-day blogs.[21]

This assignment—I consciously called it a *project*—was worth 30 percent of the course grade. I weighted it heavily because I wanted students to take it seriously (spring break fell during this month) and because I needed a simple way to hold them accountable for the daily-ness of the project. Priscila Uppal, in "Both Sides of the Desk," questions our assumptions about students' assumptions about grading:

All students expressed the belief that although subjectivity may be a problem, creative writing can be evaluated. At least in my experience, students want to be graded. However, these students also felt that there must be room for experiments not yielding immediate results. To benefit from the workshop environment, student writing has to be assessed in terms of *progress* rather than *product*. Grades matter to students as an indicator of potential and progress.[22]

That thinking guided my decisions to assign one percentage point to each post, an all-or-nothing point per day; to do a weekly evaluation in which I checked that each student had done a post each day, had not posted nonsense or skipped days; to comment myself on one or two posts for each student each week as I counted them; and, at the conclusion, to hand back scores with notes about any logistical problems but not about content. The blog project was a means toward the portfolio project, not an end in itself; first drafts are not the endgame for writers. The evaluation made these expectations for revision clear to students and simplified what could have been an unwieldy grading task for me.

To say that this project worked—admittedly in one undergraduate poetry workshop and in a very small graduate workshop—is an understatement. Even students who missed a stretch because they just plain forgot realized the importance a writing habit could be to them. I'd told previous classes how important it was to develop a habit of regular writing, but until students

actually do that for themselves, they don't really believe what Richard Hugo champions in *The Triggering Town*:

If you write often, perhaps every day, you will stay in shape and will be better able to receive those good poems, which are finally a matter of luck, and get them down. Lucky accidents seldom happen to writers who don't work.[23]

Knowing what's good for you is one thing, but *doing* is what makes someone a writer.

Even students who were somewhat frustrated that they couldn't dwell immediately on an especially worthwhile draft, because they had to move on to another draft the next day, saw the benefit of having 30 drafts with which to play at the end of the month. They could afford to have clunkers, they knew which drafts had been rushed, and they had comments from peers and from me that pointed to something unusual or stunning, sometimes on drafts they would have otherwise dismissed before sharing them. These students were more prepared for workshopping and revising toward a final portfolio than any group I'd taught before.

The Prezi portfolio

Poet Glyn Maxwell asserts,

You master form, you master time. Well, you don't, but you give it a run for its non-exchangeable money. Form has a direct effect on the silence beneath it, which is to say on the whiteness before and after it and where the lines end.[24]

Because poets attend to form and because form explores time, digital approaches offer new ways to attend differently to some of our fundamental concerns with language. A sheet of white 8½-by-11 paper contextualizes—for writer, for reader—a poem's textuality in specific ways, as does the page of a printed book or a handwritten notebook. The computer screen and the software we choose offer additional ways that form and time can be shaped in the writing and in the reading. In redesigning the final portfolio as a digital project, I thought about how a digital format could make students more aware of poetic form, silence, and time.

We tend to take for granted the visual presentation—shape and formatting—of any text on a page, whether in a book or in a Word document.

A few of my colleagues have moved to paperless courses, but that often means using Word documents, PDFs, and Blackboard to mimic as closely as possible the written essay, the printed book, and other traditional print exchanges. Maxwell writes "that poetry is creaturely, that creatures move in space and time and collide with others gladly or sadly or avoid them altogether."[25] What if a digital format could take advantage of the creaturely nature of poems? Ideally, the altered format of a digital portfolio could serve my pedagogical approach, not merely substitute for what I was already doing well in my courses.

Software like Wordpress or Prezi offers ways of seeing text differently. An erasure poem like those by Jen Bervin based on Shakespeare's sonnets[26] differs from a sonnet even while displaying a sonnet. Even that simple erasure, which also can be accomplished by lightening the font color of some words in Word, is shocking to students, and exciting. In fact, Bervin's printed book led a recent MFA student[27] to develop an erasure project based on George Washington's letters, and he developed a digital component of his thesis (with this article's co-author Douglas Dechow) in which words disappeared from a letter to create the poem as he read it aloud.

Prezi—an online presentation software with nonlinear, layered options for organizing text and images—became my obvious choice for a new way to think of the final portfolio[28] and to shake up notions of what poetry might be and might become. In many ways, this Prezi portfolio[29] looks very much like the non-digital assignment I'd already honed over the years. The evaluation criteria, which represent my pedagogical priorities and the course goals, changed very little. I added that Prezi—the format of the portfolio contents—needed to matter, that at least one poem's form had to take advantage of the medium. These criteria made it clear to students that Prezi was a tool, just as paper and ink are tools, by which they share their poems with others. This approach echoes Hayles's stance that a text cannot really be fully understood without taking into account its medium.

As we neared the portfolio deadline, I made one important adaptation. After the brief presentations—an excerpt from each portfolio—during the final exam period, I gave students an additional 24 hours to make changes. Given the variety of templates, organizational strategies, and uses of space and images that students showed me in their final individual conferences, the extra day following their presentations allowed students to learn from each other. Perhaps because students knew that they were not merely presenting their own work but gleaning last-minute ideas from the work of their peers, that presentation session turned out to be exceptionally lively, with many iterations of *How did you do that?* Students shared advice on how to make text fade, use odd line angles within a poem, make someone read a poem from bottom to top, upload a PDF, and much more. The next time I used the Prezi portfolio assignment, I devoted the last week of classes to this sort of peer exchange.

The biggest change I perceived in the portfolios was an awareness of revision. In one Prezi portfolio, the student[30] used a template with an image of a tree, which led her to organize her portfolio contents as a metaphorical tree in which she demonstrated growth, branching out, and going out on a limb. Students, including this one, incorporated quotes from course textbooks as screens interwoven with revisions to convey how their reading of poetry and about poetry helped them rethink their own drafts. Especially for struggling students or those who may be on the verge of great leaps just as the semester is ending, this new medium offers a way for them to show me their understanding of poetry techniques even if those techniques are not fully realized in the poems.

In yet another Prezi portfolio, the student[31] added notes to a draft—akin to the track-changes function in Word but revealed one at a time—that she'd taken during workshopping. That way, the viewer could see where readers had pointed her toward revision. The next draft (and the next) also used marginal notes, lines, and symbols to indicate what had been cut, added, or reworked. The ease with which I could see specific changes and understand the student's reasoning for those changes fostered my evaluation process. I came away with a stronger sense of what these students had accomplished or thought they accomplished.

Most exciting for me as a professor was the variety among the portfolios when students moved off the 8½-by-11 format. Each portfolio had a different look, pace, and feel—worked differently with form, space, and time—and students recognized and took advantage of developing a distinct project. One student,[32] for instance, used a lot of white space around his poems, as well as different font colors for different parts of a draft, comments on the poem as a whole, and notes added to indicate revision choices. He also placed a draft side by side with its revision so that changes were clear to me. Sometimes, the revised version appeared line by line, one click at a time, forcing me to interact with the poem slowly; without seeing the whole poem to start, I didn't know how long it would be until it ended. That poem demonstrated an altered relationship with time.

Another important change I perceived was the use of Prezi to create versions of poems that could not be done on paper. Maxwell writes of poets who "shift a left-justified poem 90°" and asserts, "Indents or centre-justification really ought to have some rationale."[33] Prezi offers even more radical shifts. For instance, through a zooming in and a zooming out, one can create an effect of depth of field, of spatial depth in which the viewer can move closer and farther away from what's viewed and in which texts and images can be embedded inside other text and images. Prezi also allows for rotation of the entire field of

rationales more deeply than they had when working on a standard page. This digital project echoes what Loss Pequeño Glazier asserted in *Digital Poetries*: "Whether intentionally or not, such features [physical features of the page] indicate specific rhetorical and ideological strategies employed to realize the text. . . [M]aking the text happen is never an innocuous affair."[34]

My students began to understand,

If the poet thinks that unmooring from the margin or destabilizing the space is a reward of freedom—and not precisely the opposite, a submission to mortality and the perilous closeness of chaos—the poem not only won't fly, it won't walk, it won't breathe.[35]

Prezi offered no stable margins, destabilized space even though it offered templates, and unmoored students' assumptions. Some poems hobbled, as they would have on paper as well, but the portfolios demonstrated an overarching awareness of form and formal choices. And a few poems caught their breaths and soared because, as Maxwell notes, "When this works—and some contemporary poets achieve it—it works because the poet is so extremely alert to what the blackness and whiteness represent, what it means *apparently* to move freely."[36] The digital portfolio helped my students understand that poetic form hinges on *apparently*.

Creative writing: From course to curriculum in digital humanities

Because I was able to develop digital projects for students that matched my existing pedagogical approaches and goals, I'm likely to continue including such tasks in future courses. This shift fits into a larger effort—spearheaded in part by my co-author, Science Librarian Douglas Dechow—in Wilkinson College of Humanities and Social Sciences, which also includes the visual arts. Seeing the opportunities for innovative courses and projects as well as relevant twenty-first-century skills, the dean[37] emphasizes that digital humanities, or DH, should be part of this college's future and that he wants the college to lead our university in this area.

Matthew Kirschenbaum, Associate Director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, in his article "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" traces the history of and attempts to define *digital humanities*. Ultimately, he decides that what he finds in the Wikipedia entry isn't too bad:

The digital humanities, also known as humanities computing, is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities. It is methodological by nature and interdisciplinary in scope. It involves investigation, analysis, synthesis and presentation of information in electronic form. It studies how these media affect the disciplines in which they are used, and what these disciplines have to contribute to our knowledge of computing.[38]

Kirschenbaum's article dates from 2010. A visit to the Wikipedia entry for *digital humanities* three years later reveals the character and contours of the earlier definition, but little direct evidence—only the phrase "concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities"—of the earlier definition remains. From that remaining phrase and its emphasis on the intersection of computing and the humanities, we have derived a local definition that guides our institution. At Chapman University, *digital humanities* is the use of computational tools, techniques, and processes to support traditional and innovative modes of humanistic and artistic inquiry and production. A simple example of this definition in action occurred locally when my thesis student mentioned earlier worked with Dechow to use the processing programming language to animate a digitized version of a poem, so that the student could visually demonstrate erasure as the poem was read aloud. On paper, the poem was good; in the digital form—with animated erasure and voiceover—it came alive.

Despite academia's emphasis on interdisciplinarity, most universities have disciplinary structures and expectations that make it difficult for DH, an inherently interdisciplinary field, to take hold and build momentum.[39] In addition, Glazier admits, in his 2002 book, "Literature culture in general is still not far from the computer phobia that existed in the early days of word processing."[40] While our comfort as computer users and our dependence on the internet has increased in the last dozen years, academe changes slowly, and even I had serious doubts less than two years ago. Glazier asserts, "The digital condition is real and present; it is quite urgent that we address the fact of the vibrant digital literature before us and begin the difficult drive to embrace it."[41] He argues that English departments are a natural breeding ground for digital projects, and Dechow and I argue that creative writing programs are in an even better position to be leaders in this interdisciplinary work.

At Chapman University, we have begun to encourage digital literary scholars and especially digital creative writers. Dechow worked with the dean, the English department's chair,[42] and the creative writing faculty to create a curriculum of DH courses within the English course listings that are open to all arts and humanities students. Using this strategy, a critical curricular mass, largely using existing resources, can be built within a few years. Some

of the following DH courses already existed in the journalism program, and some new courses have already been taught (Dechow teaches Humanities Computing every other year). Others are approved and will be taught this year, and some are in development:

ENG 211 Introduction to Digital Media Workshop
ENG 319 Online Magazine Production
ENG 328 Writing for Video Games
ENG 375 Composing New Media
ENG 411 Advanced Digital Media Workshop
ENG 421/521: Humanities Computing
ENG 484/584: Introduction to Digital Humanities
ENG 4XX/5XX: Digitizing Our Cultural Heritage
ENG 4XX/5XX: Ethics in the Digital Realm
ENG 4XX/5XX: The Virtual Self & World (Theory)
ENG 512 TAB: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics
ENG 6XX: Digital Thesis

While these curricular changes certainly respond to changes in the humanities at large, these courses also reflect institutional context. Some fields, such as journalism, have already become digitally oriented. In creative writing, students expressed interest in game design and worked with the faculty to build a case for courses like Writing for Video Games. The library expressed interest in working with academic units to make use of its archives, including The Center for American War Letters[43] and its digitization project in which Dechow is involved. In other words, the DH curriculum emerged from the bottom, up—locally with individuals, courses, and projects—rather than by fiat of the administration or the Modern Language Association. But the administration—the dean, the department chair—recognized the potential early on and made foundational curricular work happen quickly.

I changed my creative writing course, not because this shift serves a DH curriculum (it's not even listed above because the catalog description doesn't require a digital component be included in each iteration of the poetry workshop course) but because DH serves my course and my students. Stein suggests that poets expose themselves to "new media poetries," claiming, "These forms may reasonably complement not eradicate traditional print-based forms."[44] Further, he suggests that we co-opt these technologies; what may look like a threat to poetry might be redefined and adapted for poetry's gains.[45] Poets in the academy, working with colleagues, can shape DH.

Much has been made both within the DH community about the divide between those who make/build/code and those who do not. At Chapman University, though disciplinary traditions are sometimes strong, institutional

goals and attitudes push us toward the mode of making/building/coding and of interdisciplinary thinking. Stephen Ramsay stands as a vigorous proponent of this end of the debate:

As humanists, we are inclined to read maps (to pick one example) as texts, as instruments of cultural desire, as visualizations of imperial ideology, as records of the emergence of national identity, and so forth. This is all very good. . . . But *making* a map (with a GIS [geographical information system], say) is an entirely different experience. DH-ers insist—again and again—that this process of creation yields insights that are difficult to acquire otherwise.[46]

DH offers literary scholars the means to invent and build new ways to look at and investigate texts and offers creative writers the means to create new kinds of texts and new ways of forming, as well as formatting, those texts. As a result, our DH curriculum includes courses that involve *making* as well as using digital tools. That creative writing is already a field about *making*—making stories, poems, essays—puts creative writing programs in a great position to lead in DH.

One of the perceived threats that DH poses is to individual authorship, in large part because DH projects often involve several individuals from different disciplines to do something extraordinary, to create a project that's more than the sum of its parts:

Concepts of authorship in Digital Humanities research are already trending toward fluid, iterative, and distributed models. Whatever the medium, authorship is increasingly understood as a collaborative process, with individuals creating materials within the setting of a team that merges their identities into a corporate [communal, not business] subject (the laboratory, the technology sandbox, the research group).[47]

The creative writing workshop is, of course, a collaborative space of *individuals creating materials within the setting of a team*. Moreover, the arts generally have long encouraged collaboration and are increasingly interdisciplinary.[48] That creative writing has much in common with the pedagogy and professional practices of the visual arts, which are ahead of the curve on embracing digital modes, puts us in a position to draw from other disciplines as we renegotiate what authorship and collaboration have long meant.

The goals and approaches of DH, then, are *sympatico* with the goals and approaches of creative writing pedagogy. Both DH and creative writing are practice-based disciplines. Our thinking shapes our practices, and vice versa. To my delight, digital projects encouraged a heightened state of awareness in

my students, an immersion in and sustained focus on poetry, and attentiveness to poetic form. In fact, the creative writing curriculum is likely the most natural place for digital approaches to texts, interactions, and writing processes to flourish.

Notes

1 Leahy, Anna. "The Future of Literary Citizenship: A Review Essay." *Fiction Writers Review*, September 5, 2011. Web.

2 Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997: 3. Print.

3 Ibid., 5.

4 Glück, Louise. *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*. New York: Ecco, 1995: 92 (emphasis mine). Print.

5 Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010: 222. Print.

6 Ibid., 7.

7 Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002: 19. Print.

8 Ibid., 48.

9 Young, Dean. *The Art of Recklessness*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2010: 81. Print.

10 Stein, Kevin. *Poetry's Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010: 114. Print.

11 Haake, Katharine. "Against Reading." *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007: 21 (emphasis mine). Print.

12 My poem "The Day of Fire and Light" can be found in Issue 17 (2013) of *Drunken Boat*, <http://www.drunkenboat.com/db17/anna-leahy>. Web.

13 *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* <www.chapman.edu/TAB-Journal>. Web.

14 Young, *Art of Recklessness*, 13.

15 Leahy, Anna. "Let's Begin in Delight: Play, Resistance, Creativity (and Why the University Matters)." *Time Alloy Play*. Chapman University Press, 2013: 18. Print.

16 Young, *Art of Recklessness*, 63.

17 Office of Academic Technology, Chapman University. <http://www.chapman.edu/faculty-staff/academic-technology/>. Web.

18 Wordpress.com. Bloggers can sign up for free, though the free version allows Wordpress to include an ad at the bottom of public posts. Posts can be designated as private, in which case viewers must be invited by email. Note that in the assignment I required my students to keep their blogs private and invite all other class members as viewers; because the posts were defined as drafts, were course texts, and were being evaluated as part of the course grade, I did not want students to publish their work on a public blog during the course.

19 Prezi.com. Professors and students can use their institutional email addresses (.edu) to sign up for free educational versions. The presentations are stored by Prezi online and can be downloaded to one's own computer. Each presentation can be kept private; because they were graded work, I encouraged students to keep their portfolios private. The author of a private Prezi can share a link to the presentation for viewing or for collaborating.

20 Only two of my fifteen students had ever blogged, and only one had used Prezi before. Almost all were Facebook users, but less than half used Twitter. None admitted to having taken a computer science course in college.

21 The description of this assignment, adapted from my Advanced Poetry Writing course syllabus, is available on this book's website.

22 Uppal, Priscila. "Both Sides of the Desk: Experiencing Creative Writing Lore as a Student and as a Professor." *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007: 51. Print.

23 Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979: 17. Print.

24 Maxwell, Glynn. *On Poetry*. London: Oberon Books, 2012: 18. Print.

25 Ibid., 131.

26 Jen Bervin's erasure sonnets can be found in *Nets*, Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2004. Print.

27 A. Steven Young.

28 Because I don't know of anyone else assigning Prezi portfolios and because I advocate sharing and adapting pedagogical approaches, the digital portfolio assignment from my Advanced Poetry Writing class in its entirety, with references to other course texts used that semester and formatted as it was on the handout distributed at roughly mid-term, is available on this book's website.

29 I posted my intention on the Facebook group page for Creative Writing Pedagogy <https://www.facebook.com/groups/39509228012/>. The post about Prezi portfolios received comments indicating interest in the assignment but no indication that any other members had tried such a thing.

30 Sierra Evans. Note that the Prezi portfolios discussed in this essay were included because, after an email query to the class after grades were submitted, these three students agreed to let me share their portfolios with future classes and use them in my scholarly writing; they were not selected by me using any evaluative criteria and do not necessarily represent the full range of work achieved by students in the course.

31 Victoria Fragoso.

32 Joseph Naidoo.

33 Maxwell, *On Poetry*, 57.

34 Glazier, Loss Pequeño. *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*. Tuscallosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002: 118. Print.

35 Maxwell, *On Poetry*, 57.

36 Ibid.

37 Dr Patrick Fuery, Dean of Wilkinson College, Chapman University. Fuery has also instituted an interdisciplinary research program for faculty called CRASsH, or Chapman Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities. <http://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/crassh-burn>; Dechow and I are part of the Image Text Interface CRASsH group.

38 Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" *ADE Bulletin*, 105 (2010): 55–61: 56. Print.

39 The Wikipedia definition dropped its earlier reference to *interdisciplinary*, perhaps in tacit response to obstacles that the interdisciplinary programs incur or perhaps because, like biochemistry or women's studies, this so-called interdisciplinary field has solidified enough to be considered a discipline itself. The opening of the current entry is as follows: "The Digital Humanities are an area of research, teaching, and creation concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities Developing from the field of humanities computing, digital humanities embrace a variety of topics, from curating online collections to data mining large cultural data sets."

40 Glazier, *Digital Poetics*, 178.

41 Ibid.

42 Dr Joanna Levin, Chair of the Department of English, Chapman University.

43 <http://www.chapman.edu/cawl>

44 Stein, *Poetry's Afterlife*, 110.

45 Ibid., 112.

46 Ramsay, Stephen. "On Building." November 11, 2011. Web. August 21, 2013.

47 Burdick, Anne, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp. *Digital Humanities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012: 110. Print.

48 A conversation essay among myself and two colleagues in the Art Department, graphic designer Claudine Jaenichen and studio artist Lia Halloran, was published in Volume 11, Issue 1, of *New Writing*; this article discusses the rise of interdisciplinarity across the arts, the relationship between a college education and a lifelong artistic practice, and also commonalities and differences in our fields' pedagogical approaches.

5

Game spaces: Videogames as story-generating systems for creative writers

Trent Hergenrader

It's a lament that all creative writing instructors have heard if not uttered themselves: "our students don't read enough." As an instructor myself, I won't argue the sentiment; increasing our students' interest in reading and expanding their facility with language is undoubtedly a *good* thing and a goal worth pursuing. The 2009 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study "Reading on the Rise" brought good news, proudly reporting a reversal in the downward trend in literary reading among all adults including 18-to-24-year-olds,[1] the age of the traditional college undergraduate. Literary reading among respondents with some college education jumped four percentage points to 56.2 percent, meaning that over half of the respondents had read at least one novel, short story, or poem in the 12 months prior to the study. "Cultural decline is not inevitable," NEA Chairman Dana Gioia declared in the preface, concluding that the report provided inspiring news for educators at all levels, but also warned that we must remain vigilant against a "society full of videogames, cell phones, iPods, laptops, and other electronic devices" that contribute to declining rates of literacy.[2]

While I am heartened by this upward trend in literary reading, the tone of the report troubles me, especially the assumption that maintaining culture—however we might define that tricky term—is somehow the unique responsibility of print literature. The NEA report fails to take into account that today's students do an arguably unprecedented amount of reading and