Messy Problem-Exploring through Video in First-Year Writing: Assessing What Counts

Crystal VanKooten [1,*], Angela Berkley [2]

[1] *Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA*
[2] *University of Michigan, Sweetland Center for Writing, Ann Arbor, MI, USA*

In this article, we argue that writing instructors might support students in messy problem-exploring through multimodal composition assignments like video composition, and in particular, through careful attention to assessment practices. Through reflective analysis of one teacher's experiences with video composition in first-year writing, we suggest that ongoing formative reflection might be useful for prompting and extending problem-exploring within digital composition. We reflect specifically on Angie's interpretations of her students' experiences with problem-exploring through video, we narrate how we came to see the limitations of product-focused assessment, and we offer a revised model of ongoing formative assessment.
© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

We sat in a conference room in one of the technology centers on campus, Crystal asking questions and scribbling handwritten notes as Angie answered. It was August, and Angie had agreed to be an instructor participant in a research study about the use of video in writing courses that Crystal was conducting. As part of the study, Angie was gearing up to teach a video composition unit as part of her first-year writing (FYW) course in the fall. The interview in the conference room was the first of three that we would conduct together, discussing and reflecting on Crystal's curriculum design, Angie's teaching decisions, and the assessment of student learning.

Crystal had supplied the video composition unit materials that Angie was set to implement, and the unit centered on an assignment that asked students to compose a short, open-topic digital video using a combination of visual, oral, linguistic, and multimodal modes of expression. Angie's students would be required to select a topic and to forward a message about the topic through combining still and moving images, music, sounds, and written words. Video composition was new to Angie: This was the first time she would incorporate such a multimodal assignment into FYW. "So let's talk about the video composition unit," Crystal prompted Angie that day in the conference room, "What are your expectations at this point?" Angie answered excitedly, "I think it's going to be fun!" She was looking forward to offering students an opportunity to try their hand at "a different means of composing," she said, adding, "what I hope is that the video unit will help them learn something about how they write. Maybe there is something analogous about what makes a good video, and what makes a good paper." Crystal nodded, as she too was hoping for such an outcome—that she might see and hear evidence of Angie's students developing meta-awareness about composition,

---

that is, articulated and enacted knowledge of thinking strategies for composition that might become useful as students composed videos but also as they composed other written and digital assignments. In fact, looking for observable indicators of meta-awareness (or for the absence of indicators) was the driving force behind the design of the research study.

What we found though, after the study was completed, was evidence of very complex processes of learning, evidence of learning that was *messy*. Students were learning to write and to compose in multiple modes, to explore and sometimes to solve compositional problems, and to articulate new knowledge. What we also found—as Angie assigned several written essays and the video composition, as her students composed, as Crystal observed and interviewed, and as both of us met together, reflected, and discussed what we saw and heard across the semester—was evidence that *we too* were learning. We were learning how to recognize developing meta-awareness, and learning how to better design instruction and assessments that supported it. It is our own learning as instructors that we explore in this article, using observations of student learning to lead to reflective analysis of assessment practices for both digital and traditional writing assignments.

What we saw very clearly amid the messiness of the student experiences we observed was that video composition opened up opportunities for problem-exploring, what Wardle (2012) called a disposition toward "curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error, and toward a recognition that more than one solution can 'work.'" Problem-exploring dispositions, Wardle (2012) argued, are necessary for the kind of "expansive learning" that might involve the repurposing, or transfer, of writing-related knowledge across genres and media—a goal that has garnered significant inquiry and research among compositionists in recent years (see DePalma, 2015; Donahue, 2012; Elon Statement on Writing Transfer, 2013; Nowacek, 2011; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014) and one that interested both of us as we started this research.

In Angie's classroom, we noticed that problem-exploring was happening all around us as students composed and revised the videos. One student, Victoria,[1] for example, attempted to use satirical humor in her video, but when she showed her draft in class, her classmates were confused and did not understand the satire. A class discussion ensued in which no one came up with a definitive solution to Victoria's problem, but they discussed potential revisions. Another student, Jason, composed a video about how rap music moves beyond stereotypes of violence through storytelling. In one sequence, however, he used song lyrics about gun violence, and Angie pointed out that such lyrics might contradict his anti-violence argument. In response, Jason wrote Angie an email articulating a rationale for using those particular lyrics even though they included violent references. In the email, Angie could clearly see Jason grappling with the problem of making his argument clear through the use of appropriate evidence. Back in class, after viewing one another's drafts, one small group discussed at length the technique of speaking directly into the camera, debating the rhetorical effect of having an author actually narrate a claim. Another group questioned student Kristen's choice to have her father as narrator for her video about organ donation: the voice sounded too old, Angie and Kristen's classmates suggested, and perhaps did not speak directly to her intended audience of young people. Video offered so many multimodal options like these, and students were critical, engaged audiences and authors.

After the semester, as we began to discuss and reflect upon such problem-exploring moments, we realized that problem-exploring was a key step in the development of meta-awareness about composition for students like Victoria, Jason, and Kristen. Exploring and discussing the messy, complicated problems that came along with video composition was one way that we saw and heard students becoming more aware of metacognitive thinking strategies and how to apply them. Because problem-exploring emerged as important for learning, we then began to consider how we might more intentionally prompt and scaffold it instead of simply hoping it might occur.

In this article, we use our own reflective analysis to argue that writing instructors might support students in problem-exploring through multimodal composition assignments like video composition, and in particular, through careful attention to formative assessment practices. As we describe further below, we designed and incorporated summative, product-focused assessments for the video assignment in Angie's course; however, these assessments did not contribute to processes of problem-exploring or the development of meta-awareness. Building on the digital assessment scholarship of authors within *Digital Writing Assessment and Evaluation* (McKee & DeVoss, 2013), we suggest, instead, that ongoing formative reflection might be more useful for prompting and extending problem-exploring within digital composition. In the sections that follow, we draw on the work of Halbritter (2013), Wardle (2012), and various design

---

[1] We have chosen to refer to all students who appear in this article using pseudonyms.