



# The Digital Manifesto: Engaging Student Writers with Digital Video Assignments

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## Abstract

This article reports on two studies that examine the effects of introducing a video assignment in two intermediate-level writing courses. By examining how students compose written and video elements in tandem for a portfolio assignment, this essay underscores the need to engage students across modalities. The authors used low threshold (easy-to-learn) technologies to help students extend their capabilities to express ideas and to engage in “transmedia navigation.” To mirror the writing process that relies on peer review of documents, the instructor used a freely available video annotation system that allows students to compose situated feedback on videos, thereby closing the loop on peer review of video documents. Both studies used a pre and post survey to measure student perceptions of engagement, confidence, and interest. The analysis also relied on student reflections to gain insight into the production process. The findings reported in the studies include several statistically significant gains in confidence on a range of abilities using similar assignments. We close with recommendations for instructors who want to incorporate a similar assignment in their writing courses.

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In their essay, “The ‘Digital Native’ Debate,” Sue Bennett, Karl Maton, and Lisa Kervin (2008) deflated the myth that current undergraduates are distinctly proficient in digital technologies and possess a sophisticated knowledge of how to use information technologies. They described a much more complex reality that suggests students consume much digital content but produce very little multimedia. Rather than a radical digital revolution, this population tends to see more diversity in experience and a gradual evolution in technology expertise (Bennett & Maton, 2011).

Anchoring their work in the New London Group’s (2000) conception of *multiliteracies*, Henry Jenkins, Katherine Clinton, Ravi Purushotma, Alice Robison, and Margaret Weigel (2006) argued that students need to engage with new creative forms like video to take full advantage of living in a participatory culture—a culture that values the ability to express ideas across multiple modalities. They argued that digital literacy needs to be woven into traditional

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coursework, that it must be taught and not simply assumed, so that students gain meaningful practice that combines critical thinking skills with new media techniques. Further, Jenkins et al. placed a primacy on *textual literacy*—reading and writing—and suggested these skills were foundational precursors to 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacies: “Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new” (2006, p. 19). One way to expand those competencies and literacies is by completion of multimedia assignments. For the studies reported in this paper, we revised writing assignments to incorporate a video production and peer-review component.

In many ways, the connections between writing a text and composing a video seem natural, with parallel development processes that include planning, drafting, peer review critiques, and revision. Taking this kind of connection a step further, Jason Palmeri (2012) wrote of the ways *multimodal thinking* (p. 32) played into the production of texts and of the ways this thinking had been a concern of the field of composition for some time. Similarly, Suzanne Choo (2010) explored the concept of visual thinking and its effects on writing. By investigating what she termed *meta-concepts*, such as angle, depth, and dominance in visual representation, and matching them to equivalents in written discourse, she helped students begin to think visually before they composed a written text. Daniel Anderson (2008) focused his composition classroom on the concept of production and framed his writing space as a new media studio. Using a series of assignments that involve collages and video slide shows that use free, easy-to-learn or “low-bridge” approaches to multimedia, Anderson emphasized the exploratory and reflective phases of writing as a way to motivate and engage students. Anderson asked, “Could it be that low-bridge new media technologies provide the right mix of challenge and ease of use for instructors and students to develop a sense of control, creativity, and flow?” (2008, p. 44).

In our current investigation, we wanted to design a composition assignment that spanned the writing workshop and the new media studio. In particular, we wanted to explore one of the *core media literacies* Jenkins et al. (2006) identified, *transmedia navigation*, to see if a hybrid form involving writing and video would be engaging and build students’ confidence in expressing themselves in multimedia. We also wanted to explore whether the visual and written efforts would reinforce each other. The skill of transmedia navigation or transmedia storytelling draws from the availability and convergence of multiple sources of media—text, images, sound, video, etc.—to produce a new synthesis of those materials. Jenkins et al. wrote:

Transmedia navigation involves both processing new types of stories and arguments that are emerging within a convergence culture and expressing ideas in ways that exploit the opportunities and affordances represented by the new media landscape. In other words, it involves the ability to both read and write across all available modes of expression. (2006, p. 48)

For our assignment to be successful, then, we felt we needed to gather evidence of three outcomes. First, the assignment needed to provide the opportunity for students to feel more confident in their technological abilities. Specifically, we hoped to see an increase in their confidence to author video texts. Second, because we are interested in transmedia navigation and the students’ ability to compose across media, we wanted to see an increase in the students’ confidence in their ability to navigate between and express themselves by way of different media types. Finally, we did not want the students to find the assignment tedious or underwhelming. Students should feel engaged by the project and by the opportunity to compose in written and video formats. We wanted to teach students not only how to use video but also how to gain meaningful practice in and think critically about expressing themselves in those dual media. To that end, we incorporated a video annotation tool into the assignment to learn how to adapt more familiar written peer-review methods to a new-media context. Accordingly, for our third outcome, we were also interested in the students’ reception to and use of the video annotation tool in the peer-review process.

This essay reports on two studies we designed to examine students’ confidence in and engagement with writing and video production in similar intermediate writing studies courses at an R1 institution in the Midwest. We used pre-class and post-class surveys to collect data from students in each course. We administered surveys in one course, and after collecting and analyzing data from them, we added a few questions to the pre- and post-class surveys for the next course. The pairs of surveys for each course, then, contained some identical items, but the pair for the second course contained additional questions unrelated to the common set for both classes. We report on these surveys and their results in this paper.

Despite the addition of questions to the second course’s surveys, the process of developing a scaffolded assignment with a particular emphasis on how the two media of writing and video might advance in parallel and related steps was the same. We were interested in finding out whether students would successfully carry out such an assignment given the modest resources normally available to instructors in writing courses. Also, we were interested in what such

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