

# Re-visioning Writing: Preservice Teachers' Learning of Transmediation and Multimodal Composing

Kristine E. Pytash, Ph.D.

[kpytash@kent.edu](mailto:kpytash@kent.edu)

Elizabeth "Lisa" Testa, Ph.D.

[etesta@kent.edu](mailto:etesta@kent.edu)

## Introduction

Technology is ubiquitous in schools and classrooms. From platforms such as Google documents to Microsoft products, teachers and students have a wealth of technological tools to employ in writing classrooms. Researchers have explored how these technological advances are reshaping our ideas about genres and the ways students compose. For example, research has documented how students engage in composing multimodal memoirs, ipoeetry, and fanfiction (Batchelor, 2018; Curwood, Magnified, & Lammers, 2013; Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Padgett & Curwood, 2016; Smith, 2017). Furthermore, scholars have also explored how digital composing can easily allow student writers to engage in transmediation, defined as the "translation of content from one sign system into another" (Suhor, 1984, p. 250). And yet, while research documents the rapidly changing notions of how writing is conceptualized and how it functions, "much of what counts as good writing in schools does not reflect evolving notions of texts" (Hudley & Holbrook, 2013, p. 500).

Ultimately, students' writing experiences are directly shaped by teachers' beliefs about writing and writing instruction. As writing teachers and researchers, we know that teachers' early experiences as writers and teachers of writing influences their instructional decision making. Therefore, we are especially interested in the experiences preservice teachers need when learning to teach digital writing and multimodal compositions. In this article, we detail how preservice teachers taught and reflected on lessons focused on transmediation in an 8th grade classroom during a field experience and provide implications for how the teaching of multimodal writing is taught to preservice teachers.

## Related Literature

Research has documented that out of 50 universities teacher preparation programs, 75% did not offer a methods course focused on the teaching of writing (Myers et al., 2019). And yet, when an intensive writing methods course is offered, researchers note that salient course experiences are important in contributing to learning to teach writing (Daisey; 2008; Daisey 2009). However, writing methods courses serve as only one site when PSTs learn to teach writing, as K-12 schools serving as field experience sites are

an important space for learning to teach writing (Meyer & Sawyer, 2020). Research has demonstrated that during field experiences, PSTs specifically learn about the writing process that students use when composing, in addition to how students are positioned during the writing process (Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Kelley, Hart, & King, 2007; Meyer & Sawyer, 2020; West & Saine, 2017).

Evidence supports that PSTs who demonstrate deep understandings about how to teach writing have engaged in field experiences linked to their methods coursework. This work demonstrates that PSTs need to experience explicit connections between theories of teaching writing and the teaching practices that should be enacted. After examining 82 studies focused on PSTs' learning to teach writing that were published between 2008 and 2018, Bomer and colleagues argue that more research is needed "that look across contexts (e.g., university and field placement teaching, university preparation and early career) and provide more insight into the ways ideas are taken from coursework into PTs' future teaching." (13).

Furthermore, Bomer et al. (2019) argue that PSTs need additional learning in order to "expand their understandings of writing to include digital or multimodal text composition (e.g., Hundley & Holbrook, 2013). In methods courses, preservice teachers need a range of composing experiences that allow them to compose in various formats (Hundley, Smith, & Holbrook, 2013; Johnson & Smagorinsky, 2013; Rish, 2013; Werderich & Manderino, 2013). Much of the research investigates how preservice teachers engage in digital writing in university methods courses during specific course assignments, such as multimodal poetry (Johnson & Smagorinsky, 2013), multimedia memoirs (Werderich & Manderino, 2013), digital "This I Believe" compositions (Rish, 2013), and literary analysis (Hundley, et al., 2013).

### **Multimodal Composing**

In their large-scale study of 20 middle and high schools from five states, Applebee & Langer (2011) found, "that technology seems to be reinforcing traditional patterns of teacher-centered instruction rather than opening up new possibilities" (p. 23) as technological tools were mostly used for word processing, rather than reconceptualizing writing and the teaching of writing. The discrepancy between teachers' access to technology in classrooms and how they teach with technology elicits a response from teacher educators. In particular, teacher educators must understand how preservice teachers develop the ability to integrate technology into their teaching practice to determine the necessary experiences preservice teachers need to bridge this discrepancy (Bomer et al., 2019).

It is critical that preservice teachers have opportunities to learn how to implement research-based writing pedagogy that integrates technology into instruction and positions students as designers, creators, and meaning-makers. Multiliteracies recognizes that "meaning-making occurs through a variety of communicative channels" (Perry, 2012, p. 58), including audio, visual, spatial, gestural, and other modes of

representation (The New London Group, 1996). Stemming from social semiotics theory, multimodal literacies foreground the relationships between modes and their multiple affordances, for both conveying meaning and representing ideas (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). From this viewpoint, text is not solely print-based, but rather embodies other semiotic resources (Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Often multimodal compositions are rooted in remix theories, when media content is re-appropriated for new purposes and contexts (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Hocks & Kendrick, 2003; Hull & Katz, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

Suhor (1984) originated the term transmediation to define the “translation of content from one sign system into another” (p. 250). To explore this during classroom instruction, Batchelor (2015, 2018) investigated how middle school students engaged in transmediation during writing units while revising. Students were asked to transmediate their original pieces into new modes to “translate their thinking,” by creating sculptures, drawings, paintings, and other written genres (Batchelor, 2018, p. 345). Students used this process to “re-see” their writing, as they continued working on their final original writing pieces. Batchelor found that through the process of remaking their ideas into another medium, young writers could re-imagine the messages or mechanics of their written works in profoundly new ways.

Knowing that writing multimodally and the act of transmediation are powerful points of instruction in classrooms, we wonder how preservice teachers might guide students through the process of transforming a selection of original writing and what that meant for preservice teachers’ learning to teach writing. As Bomer and colleagues (2019) noted, missing from the research about how PSTs learn to teach writing is an examination of what happens when preservice teachers leave their methods courses and implement digital writing in field experience classrooms. The purpose of this research is to explore pedagogical practices in digital composing, while exploring how preservice teachers are prepared to meet these expectations (Hundley & Holbrook, 2013). Two research questions guided this study:

- (1) How did preservice teachers implement a series of lessons engaging students in transmediation?
- (2) What did preservice teachers report learning from their experiences with transmediation?

## **Methodology**

### **The Instructional Context**

This study took place with 24 preservice teachers enrolled in an integrated Language Arts program designed to prepare undergraduate candidates for licensure in grades 7-12.

As part of the program, preservice teachers took the course *Teaching Language and Composition*, focused on theories and research-based practices related to language and the writing process. Lisa was teaching the *Language and Composition* course, while Kristy was researching how preservice teachers learn to teach writing. The course had a field experience at James Middle School, a suburban school with approximately 552 middle school students (the school and all names are all pseudonyms). According to the state report card, James Middle School's student population is 3.9% Black, Non-Hispanic, 2.0% Asian or Pacific Islander; 2.0% Hispanic, 4.7% Multiracial, 87.2% White, Non-Hispanic. Students with Disabilities contributed to 14.2% of the student population. Economically Disadvantaged youth comprise 24.1% of the student body.

Preservice teachers spent eight weeks at James Middle School working with Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Jane, who frequently used mentor and model texts, conferences, and instructional supports, such as scaffolding, to develop her students as writers. The goal of the field experience was to provide preservice teachers opportunities to work directly with Jane and Lisa to conceptualize and implement writing instruction. The field experience took place one day a week, over ten weeks. Each class period was 80 minutes. Preservice teachers were divided into teaching groups (typically 3-4 to a group) and worked as a group to plan and implement instruction for one of the days. The other days, preservice teachers observed other preservice teachers teach.

For the focus of this study, we selected three preservice teachers, Jennifer, Sammi, and Noah. We documented the instruction they received about transmediation in their methods course and then we investigated their implementation of two lessons to a class of 8th grade students who went through two rounds of transmediation during the writing process. We selected these three preservice teachers because we thought their teaching and reflections offered unique understanding about how preservice teachers learn to teach transmediation. Additionally, a close analysis allowed for an in-depth examination into their decision-making practices providing insights into the issues and opportunities that preservice teachers have when learning to teach writing with technology.

### **Data collection and Analysis**

During the methods course and the field experience, field notes were taken. The field notes allowed for the documentation of what occurred in the methods course when preservice teachers were learning about transmediation, as well as, how they implemented their lesson. In addition, immediately after teaching, preservice teachers were asked to provide a written reflection in response to prompting questions. Prompts were used to serve as scaffolds for reflection and guides to important course topics. These reflective writing responses were analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Two codes emerged from the reflective writing responses: (1) developing students as writers, and (2) the affordances of composing with digital tools.

## Findings

The following sections document the instruction on transmediation that preservice teachers experienced in their writing methods course. We then detail how preservice teachers first taught the 8th grade students to write flash fiction. We then explain how preservice teachers taught students to reduce their flash fiction pieces to hint fiction, stories that are typically 25 words or less. We detail how preservice teachers engaged the students in another round of transmediation by revising their pieces into multimodal compositions using Animoto. Finally, we provide the preservice teachers' reflections as a way to gain insight into their understandings of teaching writing.

### **In the University Methods Course**

Lisa introduced preservice teachers to the transmediation unit that they would be teaching, specifically (within or in) the three genres: flash fiction, hint fiction, and multimodal composition. Lisa guided preservice teachers through deconstructing model pieces of each genre in order to create a list of essential elements of the genre. This led to conversations about each genre's purpose and audience. Through whole class and small group discussions, preservice teachers created a list of noticings that were developed to guide original pieces of writing.

Lisa also shared with the preservice teachers the literary techniques that were important for writing each genre. She did this by writing in front of preservice teachers and modeling how these techniques worked for the genre. Finally, preservice teachers wrote original pieces. They wrote a flash fiction story and then were asked to re-vision their original flash fiction pieces into hint fiction and then multimodal compositions. The goal was to provide preservice teachers opportunities to understand the process a writer would have to go through to effectively compose each genre and re-vision their original pieces into new pieces.

### **Lesson One: Teaching Flash Fiction**

During their time at James Middle School, preservice teachers taught a Flash Fiction unit to the 8th grade students. In order to introduce students to Flash Fiction, preservice teachers opened the first lesson by having the students read the beginning sentence of "Bath," by Amy Lowell. Next, they had the students read the opening lines of "Currents," by Hannah Bottomy and "Accident," by Dave Eggers. As students read, Jennifer, one of the preservice teachers, asked students, "what is engaging about these leading sentences?". She followed up the students' responses by asking them if they would be interested in continuing to read any of these stories based on the opening sentences. As students responded positively, Jennifer explained that each of these stories starts in the middle of the action so that within the first few sentences, the reader should be able to identify the setting, situation and characters of the story. This creates a source of tension and builds an interest to hook the reader.

Next, Sammi, a preservice teacher, asked students to provide as many synonyms as they could for the word “flash.” As she fielded responses, she directed them to conclude that flash means fast, exciting, and dynamic. She then segued into a definition of flash fiction including a description of techniques writers use to compose flash pieces. These included holding back information, flashbacks and flashforwards, unusual format, dialogue, a telling title, and playful point of view. Sammi directed the students to silently read the mentor text “Avoidance,” a flash fiction piece written by another preservice teacher in the cohort. When they were finished reading, Sammi organized students into groups of four and asked them to reread the piece together to annotate the clues and techniques that make it flash fiction. Each group shared their findings and Sammi was able to reiterate the techniques as the groups shared what they noticed.

At this point in the lesson, Sammi transitioned to photographs. She projected images of people in street scenes and asked questions to stimulate their thinking while noticing the details in the images including the characters in the images, their emotions, their body language, and the way the photographer framed the image. She shared an image she had used to prompt her to write a flash fiction piece and read her piece to them aloud. Then she directed students to choose an image and begin to write their own flash fiction pieces, using the techniques they had just explored. Over the course of the flash fiction unit, students peer reviewed one another’s pieces and continued to read other mentor texts to further internalize the techniques of flash fiction.

## **Lesson Two: Teaching Transmediation**

After students had a final piece of flash fiction written, Jennifer, Sammi, and Noah asked the 8th grade students to re-vision their original flash fiction pieces into hint fiction and then multimodal compositions. The lesson began with Jennifer reading three pieces of hint fiction to the 8th grade students with the goal of introducing students to the genre. Following her reading of each selection of hint fiction, preservice teachers asked students, “what do you notice about these three texts?”. The goal of this question was to foster students’ critical reading and thinking, as well as to provide students with an avenue for initial discussions and interpretations of the texts.

Following this introductory activity, Jennifer read her original flash fiction story that she had written. Jennifer, Sammi, and Noah then led the class in a discussion about how Jennifer’s story could be revised to the genre hint fiction. Noah led the discussion and focused primarily on the following questions:

- What keywords or phrases are most important?
- What parts or elements are absolutely integral to the story as a whole?

During this time, Noah annotated Jennifer’s flash fiction, following students’ suggestions about the key words or most important parts of the story that would need to be conveyed even in a shorter form. Sammi took notes to document the class discussion. Throughout this process, the preservice teachers worked with the 8th grade students to

re-vision Jennifer's flash fiction story into a hint fiction story. After, students were asked to independently revise their original flash fiction pieces into hint fiction stories. Preservice teachers workshoped with students by providing individual writing conferences.

Once students completed composing and sharing their hint fiction stories, preservice teachers focused students' attention to the idea of transmediation, which occurs when there is a change in or across modes (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). Using "Play Ball," the hint fiction that Jennifer read aloud at the beginning of the lesson, Sammi used the video platform, Animoto, to re-vision the piece into a multimodal composition. Sammi and the 8th grade students collaboratively selected images, music, and design features that would represent "Play Ball," as Sammi modeled her understanding of how this story, told through multiple modes, conveyed the message of the story. Students then independently composed Animoto multimodal compositions based on their original hint fiction pieces. Once again, preservice teachers used this workshop time to individually conference with students to provide support during the composing process. For example, as the preservice teachers viewed students' videos, they commented on their use of juxtaposition of images, their musical choices, the format of the video, and other principles and elements of design.

### **Preservice Teachers' Reflections**

Following each lesson, preservice teachers were required to reflect on their learning. Jennifer, Sammi, and Noah each submitted written reflections as they considered the process of helping writers develop and their insights into teaching composing in different modes.

Preservice teachers all used the word "revision" to describe the process that the students went through. They reflected that revising a piece of writing can be a difficult process for students. For example, Sammi explained this within the complexity of moving students through the writing process. She explained "students like what they wrote originally and I think it is harder for them to grasp revision. I never realized that revision needs to be discussed and taught to students." Noah followed this thinking when he explained:

Once they get started writing, the ideas seem to come a little easier. With revision, though, they've already written, so now it's no longer about getting the flow. It's more about really working out the kinks and making the work as good as it can be. It's a deceptively difficult writing exercise, but not impossible.

Within this process of revision, preservice teachers noted that the act of transmediation eased the process by allowing creativity. Jennifer shared, "revision is a process and recomposing the pieces into new genres encourages creativity in that process." She continued by explaining students were taking a "second, third, and at times even a fourth

look” at their compositions, which allowed them to “produce and critique their compositions to make them the best they could be.” Similarly, Sammi reflected:

I really loved being able to watch them compose their work in a different mode that brought their flash fiction pieces to life. I think teaching in different modes is so crucial to a student's creativity and imagination; I think it helps them expand in their critical thinking skills as well as being able to see their work from a different perspective.

Noah reflected specifically on the multimodal compositions when he stated, “I think for students who do not like English or to write enjoy the different modes as it allows them to be creative and they do not feel like they are making mistakes. English is so much more than essays and books and different modes help represent and show this.” Finally, Jennifer interpreted the multimodal composing process as an avenue for students to do more in-depth thinking and take ownership of their writing. She explained, “the students were able to pick songs and images that intentionally conveyed the tone of their piece. Crossing modes was a really interesting way to allow students to own and explore their texts.”

Preservice teachers specifically reflected on using Animoto during the writing process. They shared that the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students seemed most engaged in their composing processes while using the digital tool. Noah noted that “students really seemed to like using Animoto” and Sammi noted that students thought that lesson “was the most fun.” Jennifer noted, “using Animoto enabled them to think of different possibilities for their stories. They were learning multiple modes for writing and I was seeing how essential the revision process is to developing strong, independent writers.”

Interestingly, Sammi, Jennifer, and Noah all mentioned that they wished they had been more prepared to teach using Animoto, even though they had experiences using the tool as writers. For example, Noah noted that the students were more “familiar with Animoto” than he was. He reflected, “students are very eager to work with technology and use tools within the classroom, and I as a teacher need to be familiar with these tools so I can ensure students are producing strong work with the tools I have assigned.” Additionally, Sammi recalled that she felt like she needed to “ask students to show me how they were using Animoto” during the lesson.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Adolescent writers have access to more digital composing tools than ever before. By skillfully appropriating these tools, student writers may learn to convey complex and nuanced meanings across modes. However, as great as this potential may be, writers need teachers to model and mentor them in the processes of multimodal composition. Therefore, while this study focuses on three preservice teachers’ during a field experience, this study has broader implications for literacy teacher education.

First, preservice teachers must develop sophisticated understandings of the processes of multimodal composition before they enter field experiences. In their methods course, preservice teachers wrote and revised their own flash fiction pieces into hint fiction stories then into Animoto compositions. It was during their own attempts at transmediation that they became aware of the techniques most critical to this process, such as locating key words and important elements of genre which they then related to elements of design. These findings support the literature that suggests methods courses offer important opportunities for PSTs to understand the complexity of the composition process and need opportunities to consider the decision making that occurs during the writing process (Bomer et al., 2019). When it came time to teach these concepts, preservice teachers drew upon their experiences as learners. This gave them the background that allowed them to model their thinking in front of students. We believe this progression is important because it allows preservice teachers to learn “the process of writing from the inside, that is, what the teachers themselves as writers experience” (NCTE, 2016). Successful modeling of multimodal compositions depends upon the teacher mining his or her own composing processes for examples during teaching.

Second, there are important learning benefits when the methods course is explicitly aligned to field experience. Preservice teachers were comfortable using Animoto during their writing process within the methods course as they were learning the foundations of writing pedagogies. However, when they entered the classroom, they were nervous about using the digital tool and believed the students were more capable users than they were. Being in the field experience allowed them the opportunity to implement digital technology and the instructional approaches they learned in methods. Preservice teachers started to think through using technology, not through the lens of a student user, but through the lens of a teacher who had to not only understand the tool but understand how to implement the tool effectively. Embedding the writing course within Jane’s classroom provided salient course experiences that are valuable in preservice teachers’ development as teachers of digital writing. This finding contributes to the research that PSTs need opportunities to “approximate the practices, approaches, and theories they learn about in coursework... to guide PTs’ subsequent interactions and make clear connections to theories” (Bomer, 2019). It was the alignment between the methods course and the field experience that supported both the learning of theoretical perspectives of teaching writing with technology and the implementation of the teaching practices.

Finally, critical to preservice teachers’ learning of writing instruction was the opportunity to engage in transmediation as an approach to teaching revision. It is likely that the idea of moving a story from a written to an audio-visual form was not new to most of the middle school students. What may have been novel was the intermediary step of reducing the original text to a much shorter piece. By requiring the students to take this step, preservice teachers highlighted the importance of revision. Students were able to receive one-on-one encouragement to take the time to re-see their pieces. The preservice teachers mentored the students, coaching them through the decisions they were making about what parts of their original pieces to keep and helping them articulate their reasonings. Preservice teachers saw the affordances of this process as

students were engaged in exploration and interpretation during the revision process. This is important because as Noah mentioned in his reflection, revision “is a deceptively difficult writing exercise.” Demystifying the process by providing modeling followed by mentoring allowed students to build capacity for ways of re-seeing their own pieces, which would be tested further as they transformed their written pieces to video.

Research notes that PSTs need to understand students’ complex composition processes and their decision making as digital writers (Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Kelley, Hart, & King, 2007). Since revision is often confused with editing, it is important for preservice teachers to learn the affordances of transmediation as a tool to slow down the revision process by relating each composing decision from one mode to another. For example, when traditionally teaching revision, teachers may use acronyms that refer to common decisions writers make to improve a piece, such as, A.R.M.S., add, remove, move, or substitute. These mnemonic devices are useful but fall short when the revising we are teaching crosses modes. Therefore, it may be helpful for teachers to broaden their conceptions of revision to include elements and principles from visual design, including contrast, repetition, alignment, proximity, color, shape, form, space, and texture. In the lesson teaching transmediation, preservice teachers’ comments during conferences expanded from the language of traditional revision. While they sometimes suggested adding and moving design elements, they also commented on the appropriateness of students’ choices of image and the positioning of the images. They commented on the use of music and sound and how these elements work in tandem with the images to convey mood and tone. These principles and elements of design easily relate to conversations about written modes of communication. When teachers make these choices to embrace the additional elements of design when they teach composition, they are providing the kind of additional insights students need to become successful composers in multiple modes.

## **Conclusion**

How writing is taught is shaped by teachers’ beliefs about writing and the role of technology. Therefore, it is imperative for preservice teachers to have experiences using technology for their own writing. This is an important first step as it allows preservice teachers to experience issues and affordances that they will need to address when teaching. Second, preservice teachers need opportunities to implement technology during field experiences so that they gain the confidence and know-how to effectively plan and implement writing instruction integrating technology. The close examination of Jennifer, Sammi, and Noah’s learning provides insights into the unique experiences and challenges preservice teachers face when learning to teach writing using technology, and how they come to see technology not just as a platform for writing, but as an avenue for transforming the writing process. These experiences are important for teacher educators to consider in order to prepare preservice teachers to integrate digital tools into their writing instruction in thoughtful, purposeful ways.

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