



CALL Research Brief

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Title: Summary of using digital media in the classroom as writing platforms for multimodal authoring, publishing, and reflecting

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Original Text

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Rationale/ Overview of the study

A multimodal approach in writing refers to writing by combining two or more modes such as text, images, video, sound and gestures. This study examines the combined use of Weebly (a website building and hosting platform), blogs (Weebly blogging platform), and Instagram (media sharing and social networking application) by students to create multimodal writing. Twenty-six students enrolled in the last semester of high school were asked to create a portfolio for their culminating English literature class. It had to include a Weebly webpage, eight compulsory and one optional blog posts, and five Instagram posts. By using multimodal possibilities within these applications, students expressed personal ideas and reflected on them. The findings indicate that students created a variety of sophisticated multimodal compositions through collaboration and reflected on them. These findings can help language teachers determine the various multimodal choices students made to create digital writing products as well as the social interaction that occurred during the process. The findings can also help teachers consider out of the ordinary ways students can use to compose texts through the support of technology in digital multimodal writing, that may not be available in traditional text-based writing.

Research methods

Approach: The study is based on the idea of multiliteracies, which states that there are new types of literacies and there are new ways of teaching those literacies (Leu et al.,

2013; Mills, 2009; New London Group 1996). In this perspective, both the writing product and students' social experiences in creating the product are equally important to the meaning making process (Vasudevan, 2006).

Participants: The participants were twenty-six high school students, aged 17 and 18 years. Most students were Hispanic and more than 60 percent of the participants were female. They were part of a culminating English Literature class at a college preparatory school in the Southwestern U.S. The students were multilingual, and the pre-study survey revealed that most had experience using Instagram and Weebly, with relatively less familiarity with the use of the Weebly blog feature.

Data collection and analysis: The researcher drew data from pre- and post-study surveys, on site interviews with all students, open-ended interviews with four focal students as well as the instructor, video-recorded classroom observations, and field notes during the observations. The survey, with a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions, determined students' patterns of use of the digital platforms. The interviews with focal students focused on their perspectives about how they used these platforms. Additionally, the interview with the instructor provided insight into how she looked at students' writing across the different platforms and what she thought they learned by using these platforms. Finally, the researcher observed student-created pages on all three platforms, took notes and analyzed the modes, tone, formality, layout and conventions. These observations compared how students created content within and across the platforms they used.

Results

• Instagram

According to the results, Instagram posts showcased the greatest amount of multimodality. The use of humor, particularly in the form of 'memes' and the use of pictures and emojis to express an emotion or idea in the caption, were the most-used examples of multimodality. The way the attention-grabbing captions and images in memes were combined to create meaning, revealed students' ability to represent their understanding of the topic as well as their ability to express it in multimodal form.

• Weebly blogs

Weebly blogs were used to share and reflect upon ideas about the final product in an informal setting. Most students observed that writing blog posts made it easier for them to think informally for a longer stretch of time and enabled them to reflect on their engagement with the text.

• Weebly website

The Weebly website was used to publish students' writing for a wider audience. Since it offers the option to make the webpage visible to a selective audience, students shared that they felt empowered to tailor their writing to the target audience. This made them more conscious of the conventions of the particular genre of writing.

Students did not use as much multimodality in Weebly webpages and Weebly blogs as they did in the Instagram posts.

Practical Implications

- The study provides evidence that writing tasks that soften the boundary between in-class, academic writing and out-of-class, informal writing make writing tasks more natural, relevant and enjoyable.
- It is important to understand why a digital platform is used, how it can contribute to meaning making, and what kind of a writing product could be created by manipulating it.
- Publishing their writing for a wider audience through an audience-oriented approach can make students want to post the best version of their writing, for which they resort to process writing or creating multiple drafts—by editing and refining them. This involves rich interactions among the contributors.
- Blogging can make students think in interactive and reflective ways. Teachers can capitalize on this by providing prompts for narration, personal points of view, reflection, and connections to the text.
- Based on these results, teachers should consider using a Weebly blog for genre-based writing. Although a Weebly blog is intuitive and user-friendly, teachers may need to guide students in setting up and personalizing the blog page, creating a blog post, uploading text and images, embedding video links, and posting and publishing it.
- Teachers can use Weebly webpages with students for collaborative projects. However, students may have to be given a tutorial beforehand to use it effectively.
- Teachers can use Instagram to allow students to express meaning in unconventional ways, such as using memes to get insight into students' understanding of the topic. However, its use may be limited in more text-extensive writing.

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