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Katherine Batchelor

Digital Transmediation and Revision

“When I’m in class and if I finish early in a writing assignment, my teachers usually ask me to go back and revise my paper.”

—Maddie, seventh-grade writer

Middle schoolers tend to get requests to “go back and revise” their work, permitting there’s time. With teachers like Maddie’s doubling down on revision, it is no wonder that when asked when they revise, students reply, “when I’m done” or “at the end” (Humphris, 2010).

However, Donald Murray (2004) suggests that revision is not something that should occur at the end, but rather is something that occurs from the start. Murray believed that writing divulges what the author knows and does not know, what the author thinks and feels, and is essentially, a vulnerable act. There is a feeling of being revealed . . . exposed. This is especially true for inexperienced writers.

One way to help students rethink revision is to engage in it in a new way. For example, revision could include other modes of communication (also known as sign systems). Connecting multimodality to writing stems from the notion that learning can be powerful in many modalities. Moreover, including transmediation, the process of taking understanding from one sign system and moving it into another in order to generate meaning (Suhor, 1984), may change the conversation regarding revision to allow learners to “re-see” their writing. For example, if I wrote a short story and then recast my thinking about the short story, translating it into an online graphic novel, transmediation takes place. Transmediation paired with revision allows students to reimagine their writing, thus acquiring new skills based on intuitiveness, feeling, and aesthetics.

Transmediation engages student writers in generative and reflective thinking, enabling them to create connections between sign systems (Siegel, 1995). Transmediation also encourages abduction, which is a form of logic built on intuitiveness and insight. By using a range of texts and generating knowledge, mode switching allows students to transform the meaning and original intent of a sign to create new signs. Cope and Kalantzis (2009) explain, “Conscious mode switching makes for more powerful learning” (p. 181). Transmediation using multiple modes assists learners who can better represent their intended meaning in a generative way and provides choices in how to represent this meaning (Albers, 2001). Tapping into multiple sign systems through technology could further enhance student thinking and motivation for deeper revision.

Today’s youth are currently part of the digital age, and the accompanying new ways of reading and writing should be thriving components in literacy education (Ranker, 2006). The reliance of onscreen writing and viewing makes the role of the visual more prominent (Kress, 2003). Utilizing multimodality within a classroom setting allows students to become empowered through aesthetics to convey meaning using more sign systems than previously at their disposal (Kist, 2005).

Newkirk (2006) stated, “For schools to effectively teach literacy, they should work with, not against, the cultural tools that students bring to school” (p. 64). Literacy educators need to tap into out-of-school literacies to enhance school literacies. For many students, giving them opportunities to intermingle their out-of-school literacies (e.g., video games, comic books, and
other popular cultural interests) with school literacies may be a way to “include marginalized or struggling students, as they might begin to use what they know as they write at school” (Ranker, 2006, p. 24).

In light of all these factors, the purpose of this article is to show how transmediation via digital tools enhanced students’ writing and revision during a flash science fiction unit of study. I share two students’ stories of how they revised. I end by showcasing students’ thoughts on how transmediating encouraged deeper revision and connected transmediation to play as inquiry.

Overview of Writing/Transmediation Unit

Last fall, I worked with Ms. Smith’s (all names pseudonyms) English class consisting of 27 seventh graders. Students had just finished reading The Time Machine by H. G. Wells, and I wanted to find a writing genre that might complement the themes and situations they discussed. Flash fiction pieces are between 250 and 750 words, yet they provide in-depth connections to the human condition. As a genre, flash fiction fulfills a reader’s desire for brevity while carrying intellectual weight (Batchelor, 2012). Flash writers often rely on shocking readers with twists or ambiguous endings. This ambiguity can provide readers with a greater awareness of real-life issues, moving understanding from the personal to the social (Batchelor & King, 2014). Flash sci-fi adopts the same premise as flash fiction, but the elements of science fiction abound, specifically notions of time travel, aliens, and robotics. For an overview of the three-week unit, see Appendix A.

Transmediation Inspired Rewriting

Students engaged in transmediation in a variety of ways. For example, Elsa created avatars based on her two main characters: a teenage girl and her dad. She then condensed her plot into a nine-frame comic. Some students pulled quotes to use as speech bubbles, while others looked for the main theme, such as fear or isolation, and centered their iMovie, Glog, or Prezi on these images. Transmediation gave students the opportunity to view their writing differently, which then allowed them to abandon their stories and begin new stories. For example, Amy and Darin (both self-proclaimed “non-writers”) determined that they had to include aspects of their computer-generated transmediations to better connect to their stories. Their experiences with transmediating with technology follow.

Amy

Amy did not like the initial draft of her flash sci-fi piece, which told the story of a character who realizes that he repeats the same day every day. Her story did not flow and was choppy; the paragraphs contained one or two sentences and then moved to another thought. At the top of her writer’s notebook page she wrote, “Sorry this is really bad.”

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRIETHINK

This Strategy Guide series from ReadWriteThink.org defines and provides examples of effective literacy teaching and learning strategies and offers a wealth of related resources to help sharpen your instruction. In this case, the guides are about teaching with technology.

http://bit.ly/1sRxAVh

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org
The first day in the computer lab, Amy realized that she disliked her story even more when she began to transmediate it. Originally, she intended to make an iMovie with her phone but grew frustrated as the period went on. She talked with a friend, who showed her a video clip on YouTube from the latest blockbuster movie at the time, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. A song lyric caught her attention, “Everybody wants to rule the world,” and she thought about changing her story to fit this notion. When I asked her why she wanted to completely rewrite her first draft, she explained, “Well, I don’t like my original one, and Kari showed me this song and I was like, ‘Wow’ and then I got an idea.”

Amy did not write a new draft during the three days in the computer lab. Instead, she generated ideas of her new story while creating her transmediated object, a Glog. (Click here for a link to her Glog: http://so69kg664.edu.glogster.com/flash). The opening line reads, “Our leaders have decided [decided] to operate everyone into robots so we can rule earth because our planet is slowly dying.” Images of robots, battleships, and desolate cities surround single-lined statements.

Her final draft, entitled “Metal,” begins with, “Welcome to your new life.” This new flash sci-fi story is about a girl who discovers that it is her turn to become “robotic” and witnesses her mother going through the process. The protagonist runs away but is caught and has “become one of the metal shadows.” The story ends with the character realizing that she is on a spaceship to destroy the remaining humans on earth, with the last line stating, “Everybody wants to rule the world and you get a chance to. You know that now it is over.”

**Darin**

Darin noted that he spends most of his time after school on his computer or iPad playing video games and has done this since elementary school. Because of this, he feels that technology is an extension of his life, a medium with which he feels natural and comfortable. Darin helped his peers who needed assistance with new computer programs, such as Goanimate and Pixton Comics, with ease.

For Darin, transmediating could be equated to playing a video game. Because of Darin’s ease and comfort with technology, he reimagined his writing as a digital format, thus transforming his sci-fi flash story into the look and feel of a video game. Darin also explained that while working with Goanimate.com, he realized that he did not like his story, which occurred to him while transmediating. He felt that he needed to revise. However, the next day in the computer lab, Darin noted that he wanted to work more on the scenes in Goanimate in order to help him think differently about his story. He said, “I’m going to make a scene and base the story off that scene.” When he finished, Darin went home and rewrote a flash sci-fi that originated from the scene. The scene included military troops landing on the moon to attack alien life forms in order to recapture a time portal. (Click here for a link to his Goanimate video: http://goanimate.com/videos/03CIHPTdHxdw?utm_source=emailshare).

When asked if he enjoyed transmediating with technology, he commented, “It allows me to be creative. Also, I like technology and find it easy to understand.” Darin rated his flash piece a 10 out of 10, noting, “I gave it that rating because I really like my sensory imagery throughout the story. I also like my ending.” He attributed both his sensory imagery and his ending to his Goanimate creation.

**Combining transmediation with revision allowed students to think about their writing more deeply.**

**How Transmediation Assisted Deep Revision**

Amy’s and Darin’s stories show that transmediation influenced dramatic revision decisions, such as scrapping an entire draft and beginning with a new idea. While these two cases showed extreme instances of revision, transmediation also enabled students to make macrostructural changes.
that did not require major overhauls, but allowed them to extend, elaborate, and reconstruct portions of their existing stories.

Combining transmediation with revision allowed students to think about their writing more deeply. Sandra explained, “I think of the deeper meaning or the detail that I brought out in my object creation and bring it out in my story.” Lexi said, “I’ll think of the object [that] makes me revise and think about it all.” Amy also commented that transmediation allowed her to better understand her story, saying, “It helps you evaluate the meaning of your story and adding specific details in your story.” Tamara agreed, revealing, “When you create your object you kind of think of your story in a whole new way.” Rory said that his object inspired him to revise: “Your object can help you see your story in a new way and give you great ideas. It can help you revise a lot.” Transmediation allowed students to visually see their thinking on the computer screen.

**Transmediational Play as Inquiry**

The notions of play and fun begin early in childhood and are acceptable forms of activity in the early childhood curriculum. However, as students age, play seems reserved for outside class time, such as recreational activities or the playground during recess (which many middle schools have eliminated from the school schedule). However, students could be missing a fundamental learning opportunity by engaging in the concept of play, especially in writing. Since the term “play” may connote instances of noneducational experience to a person outside the field of education, Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) suggest thinking of it as “inquiry” in an educational setting.

Inquiry is a semiotic act when it is experienced as a meaningful act, meaning, students are engaged in examining questions that are significant to their lives (Short & Kauffman, 2000). According to Youngquist and Pataray-Ching (2004), “Children’s life inquiries, often termed ‘play,’ may be spontaneous and driven by children’s need to understand their world. These inquiries are key in their lifelong development and, therefore, must be nurtured and cultivated” (pp. 177–78). Therefore, rethinking play as inquiry recognizes that deeper understanding can be obtained by students’ self-driven understanding through multiple ways of knowing. Through these instances of inquiry, students are better able to inquire about themselves as writers, ways in which they want to think about revising, and more importantly, how they want to position themselves during semiotic acts of transmediating.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of the unit Amy and Darin did not use the words “enjoyable” and “revising” together. In fact, students referred to revision as “boring” or “tedious.” Erika stated, “I used to think revision is kind of hard and boring.” Holly agreed, “I thought revision was kind of boring.” Instead, transmediating their writing into digital expression and then returning to it in order to revise invited the notion of “play” throughout their writing experience. Heather best sums up play as inquiry when she stated, “A lot of kids like hands-on activities . . . if I get to do [emphasis added] it, I comprehend it more.”

**References**


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Katherine E. Batchelor, NCTE member since 2011, is an assistant professor of literacy at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, and can be reached via email at batcheke@miamioh.edu.

Appendix A: Steps for the Digital Transmediation/Flash Science Fiction Unit

Week One
1. Incorporate information science articles centering on futuristic concerns to activate students’ background knowledge and provide ideas to include in their own work. (In groups of three, students read an article, discuss with their peers, and then write a cautionary note to the class of what might happen in the future, including pros and cons of this scientific breakthrough/discovery.)
2. Read flash sci-fi mentor texts. (After reading two flash mentor texts each day, students engage in noticing and naming elements that make each flash sci-fi piece unique and then practice that craft element in their writer’s notebooks.)
3. Note: Students are expected to bring their initial drafts to class Monday to begin transmediating in the computer lab.

Week Two
1. On Monday, I provide a list of software programs and encourage students to help me brainstorm additional programs. Programs include: iMovie; PowerPoint; Glogster, used to create live bulletin boards; Pixton Comics, used to create comics and graphic novels; Animoto.com, used to create movies; Goanimate.com, to produce animated cartoons; and Prezi.com, like PowerPoint, but more visual.
2. On Tuesday and Wednesday, students reread their flash pieces and begin to transmediate via their chosen mode (computer program, in this case).
3. When students complete their transmediated object on Wednesday, they email me a link to the website. I then create a LiveBinder that gives each student a tab, like a real binder. I embed their links and/or transmediated objects (if contained in a file) on an individual tab for easy access when they present or want to share their work in writers’ workshop. This also gives them access to their objects while they revise in class.
4. On Thursday and Friday, students work in writers’ workshops to share their links, as well as read their flash pieces to their peers. They then discuss and think about ways to revise their stories based on reexamining their stories in a technological way. Revisions continued through the weekend.

Week Three
1. Students share their stories through author’s chair by reading their flash sci-fi pieces and presenting their transmediated objects.
2. Audience members can then comment and compliment the author’s writing.
3. Some students may choose to share their transmediated objects prior to reading their stories, while others may choose to have a friend scroll through the created object—such as a PowerPoint with images—while reading the story to provide a backdrop or imagery as an accompaniment.

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