NEW SPACES, NEW STYLES: ADAPTING TO DISLOCATED SPACE IN AN ONLINE AGE

NOVOS ESPAÇOS, NOVOS ESTILOS: ADAPTANDO-SE AO ESPAÇO DESLOCADO EM UMA ERA ONLINE

Daniel Frank
E-mail: dmfrank@writing.ucsb.edu
University of California Santa Barbara – UCSB

ABSTRACT

Drawing from a foundation of pedagogical research in pedagogy, digital learning, and 21st-century writing theory, this article posits that the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates a paradigm change in the educational apparatus. The article will work through the theories of several key figures in these studies and then detail the pedagogical changes and technologies used during an emergency, the online year, which helped the author adapt to the challenges of a suddenly dislocated and asynchronous classroom environment.

KEYWORDS: Pedagogy. Connected learning. Digital writing.

RESUMO

Partindo de uma base de pesquisa pedagógica em pedagogia, aprendizagem digital e teoria da escrita do século 21, este artigo postula que a situação da pandemia COVID-19 necessita de uma mudança de paradigma no aparelho educacional. O artigo trabalhará com as teorias de várias figuras-chave nesses estudos e, em seguida, detalhará as mudanças pedagógicas e tecnologias usadas durante uma emergência, o ano online, que ajudou o autor a se adaptar aos desafios de um ambiente de sala de aula repentinamente deslocado e assíncrono.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pedagogia. Aprendizagem conectada. Escrita digital

INTRODUCTION

On March 15th, 2020, I got an email from my program head that all in-person classes would be cancelled due to the massively spreading COVID epidemic. Minutes after that first email, the wave of confused and concerned student emails started pouring in. Would we be meeting tomorrow? What about the final presentation? What will our grades look like? In just a minute, a quarter's worth of planning was thrown into the air. Everything had to change.

In the days that followed, I scrambled to transform what remained of the quarter to function online. It struck me there how much of the whole process quietly relied on being able to assume a shared physical space. As I would continue to experiment, write, and rewrite my pedagogy through the following year, I would realize that the process relied similarly on an assumption of a shared time. Synchronicity. Together in the same moment, in the same place, we could communicate effortlessly. Nonverbal communication was constant and effortless. I could tell

when the class understood and when they did not. It was easy to ask and answer questions. It was easy to measure, parse, and enforce deadlines. The challenging question of the year became, then, how do I recreate that? how do I effectively teach without the assumption of shared time and space? To get at the answer, I had to be able to let go of many expectations involving how students should learn. I had to learn to pick my fights and to question the old ways. I had to start thinking about how learning happens—has happened—outside of the traditional educational apparatus. In remaking my pedagogy, I had to learn that learning still happens all around us. It just can't look the same as it did inside the classroom anymore.

The question that has guided my curriculum revisions has been: How do we learn when we're on our own? How do we teach ourselves new skills, develop our literacies, cultivate talent, build expertise? The answer is often that we do so through modes and procedures that have rarely been seen in the classroom. We read books that we want to read, without schedule, at our own pace, in our own environments. We find passion projects and move forward with them, picking up pieces in unscripted ways as we experiment, restart, and revise without penalty. We seek out answers, feedback and help across an array of channels: we post on forums, watch YouTube tutorials, read Wikis. We do all this without the need for points, red pens circling our mistakes, or even grades. What's essential to realize is that I'm certainly not the first to ask this question: pedagogical scholars and compositionists have been offering for years that the procedures of that traditional educational apparatus don't really match the procedures and learning styles that happen, have always happened, outside of the classroom. These scholars are right, and if we haven't been listening before, we need to be listening now.

In *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design,* Ito et. al argue that today's educational institutions are struggling to provide pathways to opportunity for all youth (Ito et al. 196). The economy is changing, as are the expectations and skill sets required of the global labor market, and yet the modes of education aren't. This results in a continuation and widening of educational, digital, and economic gaps across racial and class-based divides (230). Current educational methods, built on centuries of assumptions about classical learning, fail to reach students who engage in a variety of learning styles and have a variety of interests. Others agree that the 21st century demands new ways about thinking about the teaching process and new literacies that have to be discussed and scaffolded. To respond to the dangerous consequences of this increasingly outdated set of pedagogical assumptions, Yancey calls for "A 21st century curriculum . . . a curriculum that carries forward the best of what we have created to date, that brings together the writing outside of school and that inside. . . it has as its goal the creation of thoughtful, informed, technologically adept writing publics" (Yancey 308). In his study of what he calls Convergence Culture, where communities are formed at the convergence of fan interest, Henry Jenkins explores how fan creativity, multiple forms of media, and corporate interest *converges* in a culture of creativity, communication, response, and passion. The interaction at this scale is made possible by the Internet. Though there have always been passionate and creative fans, "What has shifted is the visibility of fan culture. The Web provides a powerful new distribution channel for amateur cultural production" (Jenkins 131), which inspires a hotbed of *meaningful* creative work, which naturally undergoes a "writing" process of

development, iteration, and revision (Jenkins 136). James Gee calls the spaces where this kind of work happens "affinity spaces" and argues for their potential as learning environments (Gee and Hayes 69). He finds that the learning that happens in these spaces is much more effective for some students than the kind of learning they're exposed to in the traditional classroom. Learning in affinity spaces is student-driven, multimodal, and multi-sourced: the student, engaged deeply in an interest in a hobby, creation, and/or community contribution, pursues multiple forms of learning. The student draws from YouTube tutorials, gets feedback from peer mentors, engages in trial and error, and copies code through a self-motivated process. As she engages, the student refines her skills as she works to create the mod, story, or remix she is excited about making, growing within and constituting the environment of possibilities. The key to affinity spaces is that they are fueled by *passion*. When a student is in a position to choose the project they want to work towards, to identify for themselves what skills they need to build and what information they need to find, when they are inspired by choices, examples, and communicative and collaborative possibilities, the affinity space is working at its best: the student becomes empowered. I have had students and friends who have spent hours on top of hours in unbroken concentration in a passionate affinity space, even when they wouldn't have the patience to spend minutes of that attention in a traditional academic setting. Pulling the idea of an affinity space into the classroom, Prensky seeks to draw upon this style of student-driven, bottom-up, passionate work in a pedagogy of "partnering for real learning." Like Yancey, Prensky agrees that today, students are learning more, and more effectively, in spaces that are built on values completely at odds with traditional assumptions about teaching and learning: "It is in the afterschool world, rather than in schools, that many of our kids are teaching themselves and each other all kinds of important and truly useful things about their real present and future," he argues. "A host of powerful tools are available to them for this purpose, and those tools-and our kids through using them-are growing more and more powerful each day" (Prensky 2). This research continues to grow as educators learn more and more of the ways that work, communication, and learning happen in modern, digital, and multimodal environments. Teaching with these modes and values creates accessible, transformative learning that's tailored to the student, that resonates with the student's passions and interests, and builds transfer as it better matches the kinds of work that people do beyond the classroom, in our increasingly online social and professional worlds. Yet mainstream traditional education has in general not seen a great deal of movement. The classroom, with its rigid schedules, one-way lectures, grades, and standardized tests, still tends to rely on pedagogical assumptions of the "banking concept of education" (72), which Freire criticized over 50 years ago. Perhaps it takes a pandemic to help us realize just how unsustainable these assumptions about teaching can be.

A helpful concept here may be that of the skeuomorph. A skeuomorph is a "derivative object that retains ornamental design cues or attributes from structures that were inherent to the original" ("Skeuomorph"). A skeuomorph occurs when you create artificial design elements that were necessary in older versions of a technology and are no longer necessary, but are nevertheless expected. The artificial stitching on a leather seat cover, for instance, would be skeuomorphic. We were used to the old technology, and now we are going through the

movements of the old technology, even though we don't have to anymore. The question I'd like teachers to come to grapple with, then, is this: What are choices you make, norms you follow, methods you use, genres you assign, ways of communicating, methods of evaluating, or expectations you have, regarding teaching, learning, scheduling, or managing your classroom, that stem from the modalities of an offline, shared space, synchronous, in-person teaching paradigm? I offer that a lot of frustrations that teachers are having are because they're trying to be skeuomorphic. If we haven't yet listened to the calls for a refiguring of our educational practices in light of the new ways that we are communicating, sharing, working, and learning in the connected digital sphere, perhaps now is the time we finally have to.

The modality of traditional in-person instruction involves the expectations of controlling attention, supervising work, necessitating quizzes and exams, and controlling attention on specific schedules. But none of that is particularly efficacious in an online environment. The norms of that modality are hard to apply in online space. We thus get problems like struggling to get students to get their cameras on, or we struggle with classroom management, or we keep running out of time, or we're trying to enforce test taking norms, or we're trying to manage students all over the world, on different time zones. These are problems we never had before, and maybe we can start rethinking how we approach them.

Marshall McLuhan writes that "The Medium is the Message" (McLuhan and Fiore). This is the idea that every technology carries with it its own discourse and methods and norms. I argue that we're going to be *most* effective if we embrace the modalities of the technologies we use and the ways that we use these technologies, and we'll be *least* effective if we try to force the norms and shapes of one technology, an in-person classroom paradigm, onto another, which is our new online environment. My advice to any teacher, in general, but certainly in this dislocated online educational situation, is to try to rethink and re-embrace the modalities and modes of online discourse.

As Prensky, Yancey, the Digital Media Hub, James Gee and many others argue, when we learn at home, and when we learn online, we use multiple genres, and we move across multiple sources, we focus our learning on projects and hands-on experiences, we collaborate constantly, we engage with our peers through discussion posts and chatting, we experiment and troubleshoot and revise without grade penalties. When we work online, we work at our own schedule. We control attention at our own schedule. This means we walk away from the media whenever we want to take a break, and then we come back when we're ready, not at exactly one specific time. We communicate across different platforms at different speeds. Ultimately the power dynamics and the focus of the learning is different: in a traditional classroom, the teacher is supposed to control the discourse, transfer the knowledge, and hold all the answers. But outside of school, knowledge is collected and collaboratively built, not precisely transferred. In passion-driven communities, work gets created, problems get solved, and learning happens collectively: members of the communities swap the hat of expertise as they bring their own interests and experiences to the table. In such an environment, the teacher's expertise is still valued, but *everyone* owns the learning process. Such an approach has been vociferously
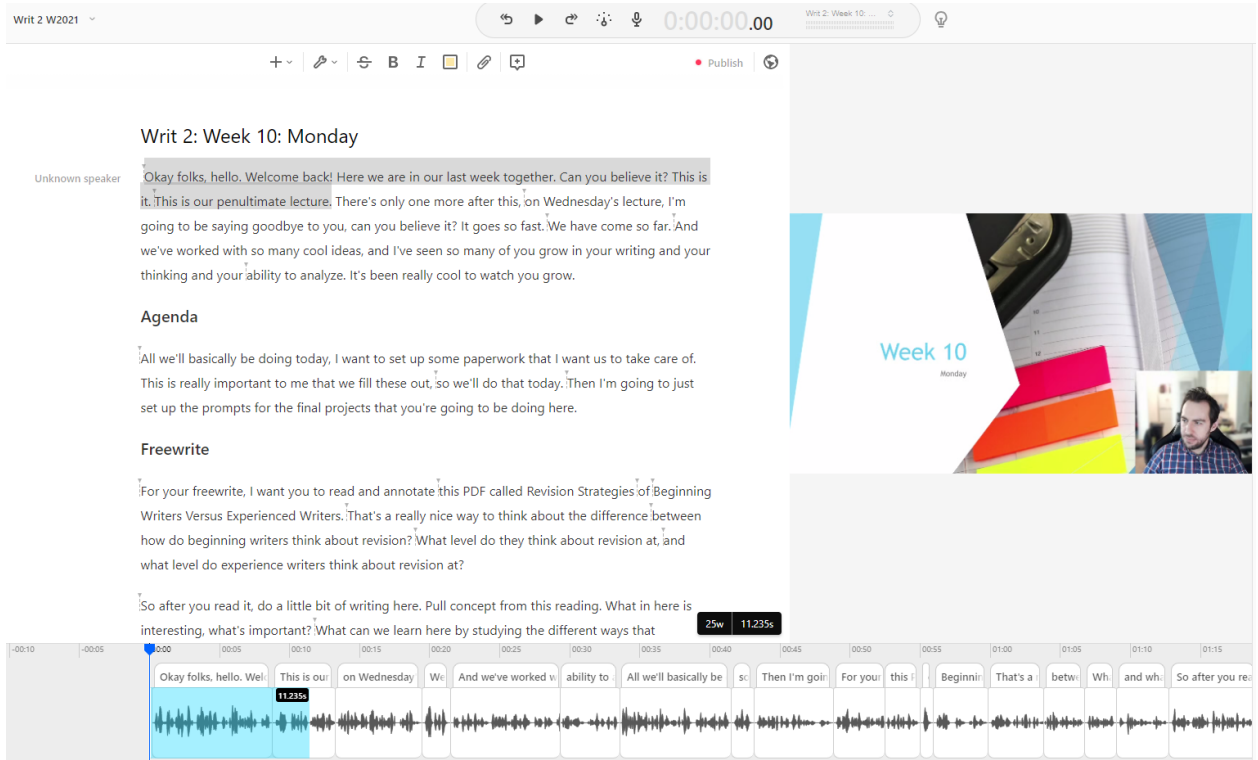
argued for, as I've detailed above. But now such an approach may be even more effective, and perhaps even necessary. We're in new territories, and we should approach these new territories, and the paradigms they demand, bravely.

In light of this, the two areas that I've worked to engage in my online teaching through this pandemic year is to maximize, as much as possible, *asynchronicity*, letting the communication and the learning experience happen on a flexible, accessible schedule and across multiple modalities and genres of work, and on the other side of that coin, to maximize *interaction*; to use the various affordances of the internet to give as much of a sense of presence of myself and my students as possible. These two qualities resist each other: asynchronicity creates distance. As such, the challenge of this teaching style is to approach this spectrum from both directions.

To maximize asynchronicity I let work be due at the end of the week. I give students assignments each day and offer them scheduling suggestions ("By the end of the day, you should…"), but I don't give credit for a week's worth of work until the end of the week. Some students start early, knowing that, for instance, they'll have a full day of their job ahead of them. Others won't start until later. But I've learned to trust that with clear communication and firm final deadlines, they will make it by the end: I simply let them figure out their own path in getting there. I try to maximize accessibility, as well, and have found new technologies which have done wonders to help traverse the online space. When I create my lectures, I import and edit them in a program called Descript[1].

Descript transcribes my video and connects the transcript to the video itself: when I delete or move text around on the transcript, the video itself receives the edits as well (Figure 1). This allows me to quickly delete pauses, filler words, and to reorganize parts of my lecture as easily as editing a document. The upshot to this is I can send out a fast, snappy lecture along with an interactive transcript which highlights the words as I say them. Students can read along, or read ahead, or pause and review, all at their own pace and leaning on their preferred modality, be it visual, audial, or written.

---

[1] See Descript at https://www.descript.com/

Figure 1. Descript's Transcript and Video Timeline.

I distribute these lectures every class morning, and I make sure I include in them spaces which ask the students to return something back to me: to write or freewrite a response, to use the commenting tool to ask a question. Descript's published pages become excellent hubs of conversation. As students speed up, slow down, hop from header to header, and read along, they are able to engage at precisely their own speeds, times, and locations. Descript's commenting feature works well, too: students highlight a sentence of transcribed text, make a comment or ask a question, and I'll get a notification about in my email, and can log in and reply to the question. When that all happens right there on the lecture page, I think that is a close replication of lecturing in a classroom and having students raise their hands and ask questions in the middle of a lecture.

What's more, Descript's ability to transcribe and automatically delete extended pauses has enabled new forms of feedback and communication that I've never before found feasible. I've been thinking about recording audio feedback on student papers for years. I was concerned, however, at returning something too inaccessible to the student: the audio feedback could go on too long, have endless pauses as I would read through the paper, perhaps have garbled audio or vocal flubs, and beyond all that, I knew that the likelihood of a student glancing at a paragraph of written feedback was much higher than opening up an audio file and sitting in to listen to all of it. Yet audio feedback had so much potential: with a lower energy cost, I could speak and comment more often than I would, for instance, highlighting a piece of language and using the commenting tool each time. I found that when I recorded my verbal feedback, I produced twice as much feedback as I did with written feedback, in the same amount of time. I

could organically point to pieces of the text, gesture with my mouse; it was so close to actually being there with a student and talking with them about their paper. Descript turned out to be the bridge for me here. With Descript, I could clean up my feedback recordings. Descript would transcribe what I had to say, take out all the pauses, and let me easily move sentences around. The result I would send back to my students, then, would be a fullscreen view of their paper, screencasting me talking through it deeply, with snappy and fast cuts that had me move from point to point, all in an accessible, transcribed page that could be textually read and referenced. The students loved this feedback style, and I was twice as productive and prolific when I used it.

To further accessibility through asynchronicity, I ask students to be creative and flexible in the work that comes back to me. I embrace forum posts and form responses of different genres. I might ask students to write a forum post in response to a reading, but I might also ask them to make a little video presentation or make a graphic and response to it. In doing so they get to exercise different modalities constantly. Their favored methods of thinking, writing, and working are discovered and then respected. I focus on project-based learning, and run through the cultivation of each class project in phases: brainstorming material that is collaboratively discussed, then first draft material which is peer reviewed, and then a final version which isn't rigorously evaluated until the midterm and final portfolio of the quarter. This lowers the stakes at each phase of the project and gives the student plenty of time to draft, experiment, get feedback, and revise. I ask students to incorporate class and text concepts into reflective essays rather than an exams: I'm more interested in hearing about which concepts really impacted the student and influenced their work, and I'm less interested in making sure the student can recite back to me each concept I've given them. Informed by Seymour Papert's theory of constructionism (Papert and Harel), I understand that learning cannot be entirely planned on my schedule: learning will happen when the right concepts find the right context at the right time.

To mitigate the other side of increased asynchronicity and to maximize presence, community, and interaction, I try as much as possible to lower barriers and make it as easy and convenient as possible for students to interact with me and to each other in multiple ways. I'll often encourage my students to record quick screencasts in answer to a question or in lieu of a discussion board post. I use a screencasting tool such as Loom[2]; It's very fast, very easy to learn and use, and it makes it possible to just say, "Hey, record a quick Loom that shows you talking about this assignment." Doing so recreates some of the sense of calling on a student in class: the class gets to see a student's face, hear their voice, see whatever the student is pointing to or talking about. The students, in turn, practice using their faces and voices and quickly extroverting ideas. Yet it's all still asynchronous: the students get to pick a time, prepare their thoughts, appearance, and environment, and answer when ready. I also like Loom because it allows for emoji reactions on the timeline. As students send out their talks, emojis from their classmates fill the timeline, simulating a sense of a classroom nodding, laughing, or murmuring

---

[2] See Loom at https://www.loom.com/

in support (Figure 2). I encourage commenting on everything. Every piece of media that I put out in my lectures, every document that I share through Dropbox [3]has a commenting feature: students can comment on any of those, ask questions, and I can dash off a quick reply. I also use apps such as Perusall[4] or Hypothes.is[5] to let students annotate each other's work with quick, instant replies to really build a sense of constant community and constant conversation happening, even though it's all asynchronous.
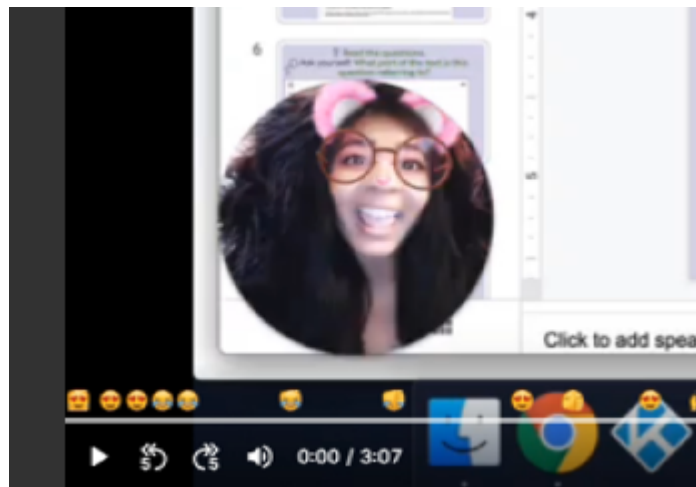

Figure 2. Loom Timeline Emojis, "Loom for Education."

I use Slack[6] to form a network of asynchronous communication and community. Slack is a collaborative chatting platform that revolves around sending messages to groups. These messages can be rich with multimedia attachments, links, and emoji reacts. I build three major channels on Slack: one for general class discussion, one for questions, and one for off-topic discussion. In addition, I break the students into groups of five and give each group their own private workgroup channel. Once that's all set up, I then ask the students to touch base with each other daily. I don't require them to have deep, revised writing on there: any kind of chatter will do—this is to simulate the kind of presence that would happen inside the classroom before and after the class or during groupwork. I've found that a small motivator, which can be as simple as saying "I'll give you five points per week if you just say something in Slack every day," is enough to push them to start interacting. I've gotten great results from this: they learn to use Slack to vent to each other, ask questions, respond to concepts from the readings and my lectures, feedback developing work, share memes, and chat about current events: it's really helped build a sense of community in the classroom and helped me get a sense of how the class

---

[3] See Dropbox at http://dropbox.com/
[4] See Perusall at https://perusall.com/
[5] See Hypothes.is at https://web.hypothes.is/
[6] See Slack at https://slack.com/

operates, how it "feels", to an extent which I hadn't felt since I was in the same space as they were.

In order to maximize student-centered work, I try to make my assignments open-ended and ripe for innovation. These assignments are achieved through what I call the "Multimodal Text". Every week or two I ask students to remix the content discussed through the week in a creative experiment with the genres we continue to rhetorically analyze in class. As students move through the processes of experimenting, drafting, collaborating with, responding to, and revising creative projects that span across modalities and genres, they become immersed in the messy, bottom-up, student-centered style of learning that modern composition demands. The assignment also asks for an Author's Note, where students can write out the thinking behind their rhetorical choices and can directly reference the texts and content we're focused on that week in class. These texts, which my students have affectionately started calling MMTs, are not instructions but invitations. I write my prompts in such a way as to give ideas about a strong way to respond to the week's content, but leave the specifics about what they're going to create and how they're going to create it up to them. I invite them to interrogate the genres and modes they find interesting, weave in their passions, hobbies, and professional interests, and to try things out, understanding that if the project doesn't end up working, it's okay, the point was the experience gained by the journey. A key aspect of making this work, I found, is to make sure that all this work gets an audience. On the day the MMT is due, I ask each student to share their work in their Slack workgroup, and ask them to share and receive some feedback from the group, trained in a Peter Elbow "Sharing and Responding" fashion: the feedbackers articulate the ways they are reacting to the piece, and that leads to discussion about the choices involved in creating those reactions (Elbow and Belanoff).

But the work needs wider visibility, too; I try to look at each turned in MMT, write up a little bit of feedback for each one, and then I choose three or four models. The models chosen are products that really pushed the bar or broke the mold in surprising ways. The next class lecture, I highlight those chosen MMTS and talk through the choices that were made that made the text really stand out. Such an approach leads to a deliberate exploration of the possibilities at play. Each piece of model work shows to the other students things that they can try, methods they can play with, ways that they can create. The process creates continually an environment of creative coconstruction. It's always positive, it's always celebratory of the work, and at the same time, it's always forward moving and working towards raising the standard of work across the classroom.

I have adapted these assignment styles across Technical Communication classes, Multimedia Communication classes, and First Year Composition classes. I want to try to create moments for my students: moments which are theirs, in the space of presentation and performance, but under their control in terms of both time and space, where they're sharing something they have innovated on, worked on, and believe in. I want my students to think of composition as theirs, their moments to innovate, experiment, revise, hone in on, and be proud of, and I want my pedagogy to create moments of performance, where students take this work into the spotlight.

CONCLUSION

None of the tools or strategies would have been figured out if I spent this online year trying to *recreate* my in-person classroom rather than try to figure out how to *revision* it, to let it fill the new spaces created and necessitated by the online world. It is a challenging time to be a teacher. My hope is that we can come to see these challenges as opportunities. The pandemic forced change, but in many ways, change has already been brewing: as we stepped by necessity into online spaces to continue educating, we have discovered that online spaces have already been educating for years, in very different, community oriented, passion-driven ways. By taking this moment to interrogate our teaching styles, by thinking about the reasons behind the battles we choose, and by opening our minds to other ways our students might build, research, learn, and grow, we'll be able to scavenge the best out of this situation. And perhaps, when we all go back to the same, reliable, grounded space and place, we'll be much better teachers for it.

REFERENCES

Elbow, Peter, and Pat Belanoff. *Sharing and Responding*. McGraw-Hill, 2000.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1970.

Gee, James Paul, and Elisabeth R. Hayes. *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2011.

Ito, Mizuko, et al. *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design*. BookBaby, 2013.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU press, 2006.

McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. "The Medium Is the Message." *New York*, vol. 123, 1967, pp. 126–28.

Papert, Seymour, and Idit Harel. "Situating Constructionism." *Constructionism*, vol. 36, 1991, pp. 1–11.

Prensky, Marc R. *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning*.

Corwin Press, 2010.

"Skeuomorph." *Wikipedia*, 24 Jan. 2021. *Wikipedia*,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Skeuomorph&oldid=1002448

833.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New

Key." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2004, pp.

297–328. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/4140651.