Choice and Inquiry

Conferring

Author Craft

Publishing

Assessment

THE DIGITAL Writing Workshop

Troy Hicks

Foreword by
Penny Kittle

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The Digital Writing Workshop

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TO HEATHER,
FOR EVERYTHING.
LOVE, TROY

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Imagining a Digital Writing Workshop

Like you, I am a teacher of writing. We rely on decades of experience from practitioners and researchers who have formulated, implemented, written about, changed, and tried again their ideas about teaching writing in a workshop format. And all of us continue to learn every day what it means to be a teacher of writing as we listen to our students, shape our responses and lessons around their needs, and assess the work that they have completed.

Teacher researchers such as Donald Graves, Donald Murray, Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, Katie Wood Ray, Jim Burke, Ralph Fletcher, and Penny Kittle—among the countless numbers of us who have employed their ideas in our own classrooms—have developed the writing workshop into a theoretically sound and pedagogically useful model for teaching writing. While we each can and should make our own list of particular ideas about what constitutes the philosophy of the writing workshop in our own classroom, I feel that we can generally agree that it relies on a core set of principles that center on students as writers, where we "teach the writer, not the writing" (Calkins 1994), as many of the aforementioned authors would remind us. There are a number of core principles that proponents of the writing workshop approach advocate, and I offer my summary of them here:

- student choice about topic and genre
- active revision (constant feedback between peer and teacher)
- author's craft as a basis for instruction (through minilessons and conferences)

- publication beyond classroom walls
- broad visions of assessment that include both process and product

These principles of the workshop approach provide thousands of teachers, like you and me, the building blocks for engaging our writers, day in and day out. These elements are all present, in some fashion, in work presented by the other authors noted earlier, in workshops and presentations that teachers share, and in the core beliefs of our professional organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project.

Moreover, these principles allow us to explore the wide variety of learning-to-write, writing-to-learn, and genre studies under the umbrella of the writing workshop. For instance, teacher researchers have begun to explore multigenre work (Putz 2006; Romano 2000) and writing on demand as components of the writing workshop (Gere, Christenbury, and Sassi 2005). These trends are promising, as they represent our work as a field moving beyond typical critiques of the writing workshop such as that it focused only on expressive writing or that it didn't force students to fully consider the context, purpose, and audience for their work across different writing situations.

And, in the past five years or so, more professional articles and books than I can cite here have begun exploring another key idea in composition studies: newer literacies and technologies. This is promising, and it's good to know that teachers are utilizing computers and the Internet in ways that they had not before. Sara Kajder asks, however, "Is that enough? Does doing something old with new technology mean that I'm teaching with technology and that I'm doing so in a way as to really improve the reading and writing skills of the students in my classroom?" (2007, 214). Her answer, as well as mine, would be no. When we simply bring a traditional mind-set to literacy practices, and not a mind-set that understands new literacies (an idea developed by Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, which I elaborate on later) into the process of digital writing, we cannot make the substantive changes to our teaching that need to happen in order to embrace the full potential of collaboration and design that digital writing offers.

What do I mean by changing our mind-set? The image in Figure 1.1 is from the classroom of my colleague Aram Kabodian, a middle school language arts teacher in East Lansing, Michigan, and technology liaison for the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University. It invites us to consider a question: what happens in the writing workshop when we introduce digital writing tools and processes? By bringing a laptop into this writing workshop, it creates new

Middle school students engaged in digital movie making

FIGURE 1.1

opportunities and challenges in the teaching of writing that the previous authors discussing the writing workshop model or the uses of particular technology tools have not fully addressed. Study this photo for a moment, and consider what happens in a typical writing workshop, where students work on their own pieces, offer peer response, and bring their writing to publication. Then consider the following questions about this particular moment in Kabodian's digital writing workshop. As you study the photo, you should know that Kabodian was inviting students to create public service announcements (PSAs) with a moviemaking program, and examples of his students' work can be found at akabodian7.pbworks.com/PSA.

Here are some questions to consider based on this snapshot of a digital writing workshop:

- What writing processes and expectations are the same as they have always been for print texts? What has changed?
- Who is (or who are) the writer(s) of this text? The girls who are seated, or the girl leaning in and using the trackpad? Who gets credit for having *composed*—a term that Yancey (2008) uses to broaden our notions of what it means to write with text, images, sounds, and video—this text? How is that credit assessed—as a part of the process, as a part of the final product, or both?
- What do the writers need to know about the topics related to their PSAs? Where do they find information that is credible and timely? How do they determine whether this information is, in fact, credible and timely?
- What rhetorical skills related to informative and persuasive writing does a student need to have in order to compose a PSA? What technical skills does she need to have to be able to find or create images for a digital movie? What writing skills does she need to have to compose and then record the narration for the PSA?
- How do writers track and manage the images and information that they find as they are researching so as to cite them properly and make sure they are employing them within the boundaries of fair use for copyrighted material?
- What behaviors need to be taught during the writing workshop, and what dispositions do writers need to have in order to work collaboratively as well as offer constructive responses to digital writing?
- How does assessment work when writers are no longer singularly responsible for their text, both in terms of finding preexisting materials that others have created and they repurpose as well as in terms of who actually does particular kinds of work on the text? For instance, if one person gathers images, another writes the script for the narration, and a third compiles the timeline for the PSA, have they all engaged equally and fully in the writing process?
- How do students distribute their work in a particular multimedia format, gain access to the Internet and sites for publishing such as a blog or wiki, and follow the acceptable use policy of their school? Moreover, as Will Richardson suggests, how does students' work get shared online so it can be "added to the conversation and potentially used to teach others?" (2006, 132).

These questions have consequences for how we teach, the tasks we ask students to engage in, and the tools that we ask them to use. And our answers to these questions help us frame our own pedagogy as an approach to teaching in the digital writing workshop.

The Purpose of This Book

In the past decade or so—and especially in the past three or four years—we've all noticed a change both in the computer technology that we use each day, including our cell phones and other handheld devices, as well as in how we are using those devices to communicate with one another. Newer technologies and media-rich environments are enabling what have been called *newer*, *multiple*, or *digital* literacies. We, as teachers of writing, are still coming to understand how these literacies interact with—and sometimes change—the principles of the writing workshop. A number of texts have explored the ways in which particular digital writing tools work, and ways to engage students in digital writing, yet I do not feel as if they offer a vision for what it means to teach in a digital writing workshop.

This book aims to fill that void.

By integrating the core principles of the writing workshop with those surrounding emerging technologies for writing, this book connects the writing workshop approach with the integration of newer technologies such as blogs, wikis, social networks, podcasts, and digital stories. By discussing these technologies through the framework of the five principles of the writing workshop noted previously—allowing for student choice, encouraging active revision, studying author's craft, publishing beyond the classroom, and broadening our understandings of assessment—I intend to place digital writing tools in a context that those of us familiar with the writing workshop approach can understand and apply them to create better writers.

In order to do this, I first provide some background in this introductory chapter about the specifics of the writing workshop approach and what others have called digital writing. I do this both to establish where I am coming from and also to think carefully about what, at the core, these two branches of writing studies have to say to one another. Then, I briefly discuss implications for reimagining the writing workshop, given how digital literacies complicate the relationship between text, reader, and writer. Finally, I outline the remainder of

the book so that you can see where next to direct your attention for your own personal learning.

The Writing Workshop Approach

Many teacher researchers define and describe the writing workshop in a variety of ways. Lucy Calkins reminds us that the writing workshop requires us "to anticipate how we will initiate, scaffold, and guide the classroom community toward an ever-deepening involvement . . . [by selecting] rituals, arrangements, and classroom structures" (1994, 183). And "when writers write every day, they begin to compose even when they are not composing. They enter a 'constant state of composition'" (Graves 1994, 104). The writing workshop, at its core, centers on students as writers and provides them the time and space to engage in writing.

Over the past thirty years and especially since the publication of Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1986 and 1994) and Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* (1987 and 1998), teachers have continued to teach with the workshop approach. Along with the exemplary work of the National Writing Project, numerous local, state, and national professional organizations find their publications and conferences peppered with references to such ideas as *conferring*, *minilessons*, *running records*, and *portfolios*—words introduced to a generation of students who are now becoming writing teachers themselves. And, while I would like to believe that the writing workshop has come of age, and is present in classrooms throughout the country, I know from personal experience, conversations with colleagues, and the amount of our professional literature that still devotes itself to discussing writing workshop approaches that this is not the case.

Why is it, then, that the writing workshop approach and language are not a part of every writing teacher's repertoire? Part of it may be that we are engaging students in writing, but not through a workshop approach. For instance, Katie Wood Ray and Lester Laminack argue:

> I have seen many classrooms where students "do the writing process," and the focus is on *pieces of writing* and how to take those pieces of writing through each step of the process—prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publication. . . . This down-the-line kind of emphasis can be

> contrasted to a writing workshop where the focus is very much on *writers* rather than on the process that leads to finished pieces. Now, without a doubt, students in writing workshops utilize all the steps of the writing process—their teachers gives them lots of instruction around the process so they can get pieces ready for publications—but it's not as though they really *do* the writing process. It's more like they *use* the writing process to get other things done. (2001, 4,)

There can be a world of difference between doing and using the writing process when it comes to our philosophy about teaching writing. That is, if we focus on making individual pieces of writing better, then we fail to see the larger goal of our instruction—helping students become better writers. Hence the mantra "Teach the writer, not the writing" (although, through many discussions with my Red Cedar Writing Project colleague Liz Webb about professional development and how we frame this idea to our fellow teachers, we have come to say, "Teach the writer, then the writing").

As I mentioned earlier, there may not be a general consensus around every single element of what is or is not a part of the writing workshop approach. That, however, is not as important as the fact that the approach itself has been proven to work in countless classrooms and, whether we agree it is a valid measure or not, in the test scores of the children who participate in such classrooms. For instance, recent work through the National Writing Project's (2006) Local Sites Research Initiative showed that students of teachers who had attended an NWP summer institute outperformed their peers in classes of teachers who had not attended a summer institute in all six traits of writing measured, save one, in which there was no difference. Also, in a meta-analysis of studies, a number of writing strategies are verified to improve student writing, many of which are used in a writing workshop approach, including "planning, revising, and editing," collaboration, goal setting, prewriting, inquiry activities, and the study of models (Graham and Perin 2006).

We all know that formulas—be they five paragraphs, six traits, or any number of stages in the process—still exist. Moreover, they permeate our curriculum guides, bookshelves, and professional discussions. They are not going away. Yet writing is a complicated, recursive, and ever-changing process. With the addition of technology, that process changes even more.

Like Ray and Laminack, I often talk with teachers who feel that they are doing the writing process, yet their students seem uninterested in writing. I do not propose that technology is or ever will be the silver bullet for solving apathy, although I know that many people (especially those who market

computer-based essay scoring or automated reading tests) make that claim. Instead, I argue here and throughout this book that if we engage students in real writing tasks and we use technology in such a way that it complements their innate need to find purposes and audiences for their work, we can have them engaged in a digital writing process that focuses first on the writer, then on the writing, and lastly on the technology. As we shift our attention from the technology back to the writer, we begin to take the stance of not just integrating computers or using a particular program and begin to think about how to structure our digital writing workshop.

Newer, Multiple, and Digital Literacies: The Theories Behind Digital Writing

As writing has changed with computer-mediated, networked environments, so too have our conceptions about what it means to be literate. Although I could spend significant time discussing broader theories of literacy learning, and the implications that each has for how we pursue the teaching of writing, suffice it to say here that I subscribe to a sociocultural perspective that began gaining traction about the same time that the writing workshop approach to teaching did. This perspective on literacy learning holds that individuals learn how to read and write for specific purposes, in specific contexts, and that there is a commonly accepted form of discourse that schools adhere to in their teaching of reading and writing. From this perspective, then, it is important to teach students both how to read and write as well as how to be critical of what they are reading and writing. In other words, writing—whether in school or out, whether on a computer or a pad of paper—is an individual act mediated by the world around us, an act that we must be constantly conscious of while we engage in it.

Thus, there are many different angles to literacy learning that can inform our thinking about what it means to write with technology and how writing is changed by technology. Three of them pertinent to understanding digital writing include Lankshear and Knobel's "new literacies," the New London Group's "pedagogy of multiliteracies," and Gilster's "digital literacies." Looking at each one of these in some detail will provide a broad look at what it can mean to be literate in the twenty-first century.

The first theory, new literacies, developed by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2006), outlines how newer technologies and social norms are changing what it means to be literate, suggesting that there are two mind-sets that accompany old and new ways of envisioning literacy:

> We distinguish between two broad mindsets that people use to understand and orient themselves toward the world. One mindset approaches the contemporary world as being much the same now as it has been in the past, only a bit more "technologized"—it has digital technologies added to it, but is nonetheless to be understood and related to more or less as we have done for the past 200 to 300 years. . . . The other mindset sees the world as having changed very significantly from how it was, necessitating a different approach from the one used in the past. . . . It recognizes cyberspace as a fact of the new world, to be taken into account along with the physical world, but believes that cyberspace operates on the basis of different assumptions and values from physical space. (80)

The differences in these mind-sets, especially for us as writing teachers, make us question our fundamental beliefs about learning. For instance, it is a difference between trusting only books from the library and being open to having students cite from (and, perhaps, write in) Wikipedia, between posting our assignments and students' work on a closed course management system and using a blog that parents and students can see from home or school. These are significant changes for us to consider, and Knobel and Lankshear remind us that we may need "a different approach from the one used in the past," one that inevitably involves networks, collaboration, and shared visions of how knowledge is made and distributed differently in digital spaces.

The second theory, a pedagogy of multiliteracies, emerged from the work of the New London Group (2000), and it suggests that learners become literate by engaging in four stages of literacy learning that examine "designs of meaning." In other words, how do particular communities of people produce and consume texts? For writing teachers, the concept of being multiliterate means that we need to both teach linguistically diverse students and honor the languages and dialects that they bring while also introducing them to the larger discourse of schooling and the community. Also, it means teaching about visual, aural, spatial, gestural, and other literacies that move beyond basic print texts. Together, this need to recognize linguistic diversity and engage in multimodal production of texts complicates the teaching of writing (or, to use a term that a number of scholars including Yancey [2008] use instead to describe the act of writing now, *composing*). Writing is, quite simply, about more than putting

words on paper (or screen), but about the many ways in which language, culture, and technology interact.

Then there are documents that outline what have been called "electronic," "twenty-first-century," or, the term I prefer, "digital" literacies. A search on the phrase **digital literacy**, coined by Paul Gilster, now generates a list of dozens of books from Amazon and 392,000 hits from Google. As outlined in his "Primer on Digital Literacy," Gilster (1997) suggests that evaluating content, mastering search engines, and setting up personal news feeds are the building blocks for being digitally literate. These types of skills are reflected in numerous recent curriculum documents and policy statements, yet they refer only to the consumption of information, not its production. In order to better understand the creation of digital texts, the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center Collective (2005) suggests that we think of writing as networked. The researchers in the Collective argue that "[c]onnectivity allows writers to access and participate more seamlessly and instantaneously within web spaces and to distribute writing to large and widely dispersed audiences." In conjunction with Gilster's definition of digital literacy, where students carefully gather and consume digital texts, the WIDE Research Center Collective's ideas suggest that it is just as important for writers to share their own digital texts as it is for them to consume the texts produced by others.

New literacies. Multiliteracies. Digital literacies. Digital writing. It all continues to evolve rapidly, and as writing teachers we need to hold on to some solid ground, some practices that we know work when it comes to teaching writing. This is where the writing workshop model for teaching becomes a key component in how we can help our students learn to be smart digital writers. And, by defining *digital writing*, I borrow from the forthcoming text *Because Digital Writing Matters* (DeVoss, Hicks, and the National Writing Project): digital writing consists of "compositions created with, and oftentimes for, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet." This is a broad definition and includes everything from instant messages to word-processed documents attached to an email, from slide show presentations to video and audio productions. While it is difficult to pin down exactly what digital writing *is*, in some ways worrying about categorizing digital writing does not matter as much anymore, because nearly all writing that we do is digital in some way; whether we get information from the Internet that informs how we develop the plot of a story, or see a commercial that helps us think of a creative idea to reach our audience in a presentation, nearly all writing today is informed by, if not created with, digital writing tools including websites, software packages, a variety of media sources, and networked communication. Thus, when we ask

students to be writers in this age, we are inherently asking them to be digital writers. Therefore, our pedagogy needs to acknowledge this shift and adopt a perspective that honors and integrates digital writing into our classrooms.

Framing Your Digital Writing Workshop

There are many reports and sets of professional and curricular standards that outline the need to connect literacy and technology, yet perhaps none does this so succinctly as the "Neglected 'R'" report (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges 2003), which argues that we need to develop a national technology and writing policy, one that includes hardware and software as well as professional development for teachers. Since both the technologies for writing as well as the nature of writing itself continue to change, we need a framework for understanding how to teach writing that is consistent with our current model of teaching in the writing workshop and also integrates newer literacies and technologies.

In order to do this, we must build upon our existing knowledge about the writing workshop, as it can help us reach this goal of using technology in pedagogically sound and sustainable ways. By taking the model of the writing workshop and repurposing it for a new approach to teaching digital writing, we have an opportunity to meet these ambitious goals.

Therefore, I have chosen to focus on the five principles of the writing workshop that have direct implications for teaching digital writing. These are the pillars of the writing workshop that will not change. However, the way that we approach them as we write in digital environments will change. These five principles capture most of what we, as writing teachers, feel are the important components of our workshops, and thus I've organized the rest of the book around them.

Overview of the Book

Because I chose to build the framework for this book around the five core principles of the writing workshop and then layer in discussions of the tools used to support them, the next five chapters of the book each highlight one of the principles and reframe it in light of newer literacies and technologies for

digital writing. Each chapter examines tools that can be used to support these principles in action and concludes with a section called "Looking Ahead" that offers additional ideas for how to extend the tools or use other web-based technologies for what Richardson (2006) calls the "read/write web," where readers can easily contribute comments on existing materials or create and share their own texts, images, audio, and video.

- Chapter 2, "Fostering Choice and Inquiry Through RSS, Social Bookmarking, and Blogging," demonstrates how new options for gathering, tagging, and saving information allow students to make their own choices as they pursue and write about topics of personal interest.
- Chapter 3, "Conferring Through Blogs, Wikis, and Collaborative Word Processors," examines the process of conferring and how it changes for students and teachers through web-based tools such as blogs, wikis, and collaborative word processors.
- Chapter 4, "Examining Author's Craft Through Multimedia Composition," combines a discussion on author's craft through what we already know about elements such as leads, snapshots, transitions, repetition, and idea development with multimedia compositions such as podcasts and digital stories.
- Chapter 5, "Designing and Publishing Digital Writing," discusses new modes of publication and distribution for digital texts, including audio and video formats that still rely heavily on the recursive processes of brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing.
- Chapter 6, "Enabling Assessment over Time with Digital Writing Tools," returns to the constant question of assessment and how digital writing can rely on traditional elements of formative and summative assessment, yet also requires us to rethink how we assess writing.
- The closing chapter, "Creating Your Digital Writing Workshop," revisits the major themes developed in each of the previous chapters, asking broadly, "What does it mean to be a teacher of writing in the twenty-first century?" while delivering a framework for thinking about that question, too.
- Finally, the appendix, "Exploring Copyright Through Collaborative Wiki Writing," which originally appeared in slightly different form in NCTE's *Classroom Notes Plus* (Hicks 2008), offers a practical set of lessons for how to integrate a digital writing tool, the wiki, with a key concept in understanding digital writing: copyright.

And, on that topic of copyright, which is reiterated throughout this text, there are many good resources on fair use in education that I recommend you review to be sure you are using the work of others appropriately, most recently the *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education*, available at mediaeducationlab.com/sites/mediaeducationlab.com/files/CodeofBest PracticesinFairUse.pdf (Center for Social Media 2008). In fact, the entire Media Education Lab website (mediaeducationlab.com/) has a number of resources that are worth exploring as you invite your students to create digital writing and consider fair-use provisions in that process.

The appendix of this book is a perfect example of how my understanding of this topic—as well as many other ideas related to digital writing—continues to evolve. For instance, when I wrote the article that is in the appendix, I wrote about the fact that teachers should be extremely careful about the use of copyrighted works. That is the message I had been hearing for years. Then, in the course of finishing this book, two events helped me rethink my understandings of copyright. In a webcast of *Teachers Teaching Teachers* on January 14, 2009, hosts Paul Allison and Susan Ettenheim discussed aspects of fair use with one of the authors of the fair use guide, Peter Jaszi (archived episodes are available at teachersteachingteachers.org/). From that discussion, I gained insights into ways that students and teachers are, under the provisions of fair use, actually able to use copyrighted works in a variety of contexts. Then, a few weeks later, I attended EduCon 2.1 at the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia and heard a teacher, Kristin Hokanson, along with one of the other authors of the guide, Renee Hobbs, discuss fair use and show numerous examples that, a year earlier, I would have thought to be a copyright violation. In short, my thinking changed nearly overnight, and I look back at the original draft of my appendix, written many months before I completed this book, and see the many ways I would now add fair use as a part of the lesson. I hope you can implement these ideas when you teach your students about copyright.

All of this is just to say that digital writing—both in content and in form—is malleable. Just when you think you understand everything about copyright, for instance, you begin to see it in a new way. Or, once you think you have mastered how to post something on a wiki, the interface changes and adds new features. Perhaps this is what I like most about being engaged in the teaching of digital writing: every day brings something new. And, thus, the lessons and ideas presented in this book are done so in a manner that, I hope, invites you to see them as exemplars of how to engage in the teaching of digital writing and not as processes to be followed in lockstep, because things continue to change.

Throughout the text, then, you will find examples from students and teachers with whom I have collaborated over the past few years, mostly through the National Writing Project. These lesson plans and links both provide you examples of teaching and learning writing in a digital age and serve as proof that we are all still learning. As I often joke with teachers in my preservice classes or professional development workshops, I am only one step ahead of those with whom I work. Many times, they will ask a question about a particular element of technology or an aspect of digital writing that I have not considered. I seek an answer, share it with them, and then we all figure out the next set of questions to ask. And, as the list of questions about Kabodian's picture in Figure 1.1 demonstrates, the questions about the technical aspects of how to do a particular task with a digital writing tool are usually eclipsed by the questions about how to teach and assess the digital writing itself. The important point is to keep posing questions.

So, please approach this book as a conversation with a colleague, a conversation that we can engage in both in these pages, as writer and reader, and online, where you can take the role of writer, and I the reader, communicating through digital writing. As you read, and engage in digital writing with your students, please share your questions, comments, and ideas. As a part of that continuing conversation, I also invite you to join me on this book's social network at digitalwritingworkshop.ning.com/.

Let's begin the journey.