

Title: Empowering Novicehood through Digital Composition

Description: In this article, we define and discuss the empowering nature of novicehood, how digital modalities allow both teachers and students to practice adopting the position of novice, and reflect on our experiences assigning digital multimodal projects in our first-year writing courses.

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Novicehood is a necessary space for a student to inhabit because they must recognize what they don't know before they can undertake their journey to proficiency. Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak argue in *Writing Across Contexts* that this acknowledgement should motivate students because novicehood is a position from which one can only move forward (Yancey et al. 19). It is not a state students automatically identify as empowering; they may initially think of this designation as an indication that they are somehow less than what they ought to be, or what we want them to be. This feeling of incompetence can certainly lessen a learner's desire to engage, which is directly opposed to what our goal as teachers should be (Gannon 136).

We argue that approaching novicehood as a continual state allows space for errant exploration—movement or progress that does not have a fixed destination. We agree with scholars like Elizabeth Wardle and Sean Michael Morris,¹ that writers develop conceptual knowledge through embracing this experimental and errant space; they also hone their ability to identify the underlying principles and patterns of a rhetorical system, as well as the rhetorical skills necessary to navigate the many different discourses with which they will engage throughout their academic, professional, civic, and social lives. Learning that encourages error as an essential part of the process is deeper, more meaningful, and more transferable (Brown et al. 84-101).

As teachers, we can and must take on the position of novicehood ourselves, providing models not just of *effective writing*, but *effective learning*. As Gannon says, "After twenty years teaching in higher education, I have concluded the three most powerful words we can say to our students might just be 'I don't know'" (133). Joining students in the empowering pursuit of novicehood flattens the classroom dynamic and blurs many of the distinctions between teacher/student, expert/inexpert. While these power dynamics continue to exist, creating opportunities for our students to share our power creates student agency and deepens their investment in their work. This also may be a way of meeting our students where they are, so to speak. If we are to adequately respond to the needs of our students, we must create space for the creative,

¹ See Sean Michael Morris "[A Manifesto for Community Colleges, Lifelong Learning, and Autodidacts.](#)" "[Courses, Composition, Hybridity,](#)" and "[Digital Writing Uprising](#)" *An Urgency of Teachers: the Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy*. See also "You Can Learn to Write in General," by Elizabeth Wardle, in [Bad Ideas About Writing](#), ed. Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe

imaginative, and collaborative thinking necessary for both teacher and student to take on this position of novicehood.

This is a big ask. After all, we are trained and socialized to be the experts in our classrooms and to maintain rigorous academic standards, but if we are to cultivate intellectual agility in our students, we must be willing to re-envision the notion of rigor.² In “The Twitter Essay,” Jesse Stommel argues that because of digital modalities, how we use language is changing and that writing teachers should embrace this change in the classroom if we want to empower students to engage in real-world conversations in meaningful ways. To do so, however, requires many of us to admit that we too are developing these skills, and that the continually evolving nature of our digital communications throws into doubt the idea that anyone can really be an expert across all modalities.

In 2018, realizing students needed opportunities to develop internet literacy skills, Emily, one of the co-authors of this article, tried something that was new to her by assigning a [multimodal website project](#) as the culmination of her first-year writing classes. For this assignment, students transformed two to three different pieces of writing they completed throughout the semester—usually a research essay, an annotated bibliography, and sometimes a shorter community definition essay—and submitted them to a [collaborative website](#). Each semester, students contributed to the site, expanding on the work of previous students. They learned how to compose for a digital space, developing basic webpage design skills and [revising](#) their written pieces to fit a new modality and audience.

Similarly, Keith, this article’s other co-author, first assigned a [digital multimodal project](#) in Fall 2019. Students finished the semester by creating multimodal projects persuading an audience outside of the classroom to participate in an activity the student was passionate about. Keith’s objective was threefold: (1) get students thinking about [multimodality](#) and [visual rhetorics](#), (2) make the concept of composing for a particular audience real, and (3) allow students the opportunity to leverage the many literacies they bring to the writing classroom that they may not otherwise have been able to showcase.

To acknowledge the difficulty of these projects and allow for the variety of projects students might produce, we both required students to complete a [design statement](#). Worth at least fifty percent of the project grade, these statements gave students the chance to explain their rhetorical choices and emphasized the importance of labor, creativity, and intentionality over the “quality” of the projects that they produced. However, we experienced a similar problem: while we had many discussions with students about rhetorical choices throughout the semester, we had not asked them to explicitly explain and justify their choices before asking them to do so for this final project. As a result, students offered vague descriptions and explanations of choices, demonstrating little of the in-depth consideration of rhetoric that they had engaged in throughout the semester.

² See Peter Rorbaugh, Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel [“Beyond Rigor.”](#) *Hybrid Pedagogy*.

Additionally, Emily quickly discovered that students began to make composition choices she did not anticipate. For example, one motivated student came to her with a problem—the audience for her research project would never scroll through a page featuring lengthy annotated bibliography entries. What is more, this traditional format significantly disrupted design uniformity across the student’s webpages, which she intentionally kept minimalistic and image-focused. During their conversation, Emily recognized that she had limited this student’s ability to fully engage with this digital modality by setting parameters based on what she could imagine her students creating. She did this in the hopes that these limitations would prevent them from feeling too overwhelmed by choice. For some, however, she had unintentionally stifled the very experimentation and creativity she wanted to enable.

Keith realized he had made the opposite error, allowing his students too much freedom and providing them with too little support. He had attempted to provide some scaffolding by including a list of software with which he had some familiarity—[WordPress](#), [Screencast-o-Matic](#), and various social media platforms—on the assignment prompt, but permitted students to choose any approach that they found appropriate or compelling. Unfortunately, this presented an overwhelming degree of choice and left many students confused about the purpose of the project and unsure how to proceed. As a result, many defaulted to areas where they were comfortable, creating Instagram accounts or PowerPoint presentations; however, these projects often failed to adequately address the goals of the assignment. For instance, a PowerPoint created for and presented to the class did not appeal to an audience beyond the classroom.

We found ourselves inhabiting the space of novicehood, realizing not only that we had more to learn about teaching composition, but also that we would never be at the end of this learning process. It was through embracing this perpetual novicehood that we were empowered to continue to experiment and make changes in our teaching practices, an experience we want for our students as well.

After our initial experiences, we both revised our assignments and began to incorporate rhetorical reflection and digital composition more thoroughly into our courses. In the Fall 2020 semester, Keith overhauled his project, asking students to [create portfolio websites](#) using [Edublogs](#) (a blogging service powered by WordPress). Much like Emily’s project, this was conceived as a way for students to see each others’ work, learn the basics of web design, and use real-world technologies in writing for real audiences. Students composed blog posts including [entries about their work](#), entries pertaining to [genre and audience experiments](#), and [rhetorical précis](#). Throughout the semester, they [revised](#) their two larger research-based papers, eventually publishing them as static pages to their blogs, in the process, shifting their work from addressing a scholarly audience to a more popular one. As both novice writers and novice web designers, this was an uncomfortable task for them, but because Keith had some experience with WordPress, he was able to offer the kinds of scaffolding necessary for students to eventually become comfortable with the tool. As a novice in using this platform as an educational tool, however, he regularly polled his students regarding their needs and adjusted his expectations accordingly.

In many ways Keith's blogging project was much more successful than his initial attempts in the Fall 2019 semester. For instance, one student wrote in her end-of-semester reflection that she "had the opportunity to feel like a 'blogger' during this course. When writing some of the genre blogs, [she] had to pretend like [she] was in the position of someone who writes these things for a living. This was especially helpful for genre blogs . . . where [she] was directly helping the readers." However, there were other students who ended up frustrated by Keith's move away from the LMS and into an open blogging space. In future semesters, Keith will provide regular reminders for both why he is asking students to work outside their comfort zones (in this case, the Canvas LMS) and what this work is supposed to achieve.

Emily's experiences assigning and assessing the digital multimodal project in her first-year composition classes taught her a great deal about productive erring. She realized that strict guidelines could, in many cases, be replaced with techniques and tools that allow for transparency and collaboration throughout the composition process. Students could experiment with digital composition and then share with one another what does and does not work. This allowed them to experience digital writing as a communal activity. Once the students became comfortable taking creative risks, they developed much more meaningful connections with their own work and made the kinds of productive mistakes that build confidence, in-depth understanding, and transferability.

The collaborative nature of the course website helped Emily re-envision what collaboration might look like for other writing projects. She noticed that while she could not anticipate all of the creative ways students might approach their digital projects, they still found examples very helpful. Because they were able to view what students had created during previous semesters, they could make increasingly complex and interesting rhetorical choices. To allow students to see each other's work earlier and more frequently, Emily began requiring students to use shared Google folders to engage in peer review and encouraged them to look at each other's progress throughout the composition process. Students responded positively. While they did not directly mimic one another's work—the nature of their writing projects would have made this difficult—they did begin to reflect on effective and ineffective rhetorical choices in peer drafts and make changes to their own drafts accordingly.

This emphasis on transparency and collaboration began to impact the way Emily approached assessment. During the Summer 2019 semester, she began requiring students to complete [self-assessments](#)³ for each of their major writing assignments. These self-assessments incorporated some aspects of the design statements she assigned in previous semesters, but they also asked students to reflect on their labor investment and evaluate how their work aligned with both the requirements for each assignment and their progress toward writing, reading, and critical thinking goals. This gave students more agency over their work, a result several students cited as a reason they found themselves less focused on grades and more focused on the composition process.

³ The linked video describes self assessments, though this specific project assessment is not mentioned.

Many of the changes we advocate for here do not work well in isolation. This was the error we both made in our first attempts at introducing digital projects into our classes; we asked students to engage with digital composition without fully understanding how that task impacted other aspects of our courses. What we initially envisioned as isolated culminating digital projects led to us rethinking our entire pedagogy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our approach to assessment. We realized that, in order to truly allow ourselves and our students to embrace the empowering nature of novicehood, we needed to reconsider our approaches to evaluating student work. If we were to truly encourage our students to embrace novicehood as an empowering state, within digital spaces and elsewhere, then we needed to allow students room for error, and moving away from conventional grades was the best way to do this. After all, there is no single way to be a novice, just as there is no single way to be an expert.

Works Cited

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