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Digital Authorship: Issues and Implications for Educators

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the term digital authorship is examined in relation to literacy learning. We reflect on two critical issues that are sometimes overlooked features of digital literacy in relation to the pedagogical practices of digital authorship. Teachers who are advancing literacy in the context of digital authorship are attentive to the different stages of the creative process and have a solid understanding of the use of mentor texts and remix practices in relation to the law of copyright and fair use. We consider how these issues apply in the context of digital storytelling and show how a variety of hands-on pedagogical practices and digital platforms support students' identities as digital authors. We acknowledge the need for teachers to demonstrate tenacity in the face of some particular delights and tribulations of digital authorship as it occurs in the institutional context of schools and schooling.

Keywords: *digital literacy, media literacy, literacy, learning, digital, authorship, mentor texts, remix, pedagogy*

Although many learners use Instagram, Snap, Twitter and Facebook, we wonder: do they see themselves as digital authors when they make a post or tweet? Do they recognize their own abilities to remix and reuse materials found online? Do they think of themselves as digital authors? And because we teach current and future teachers, we also wonder: How do current and future teachers use and explore user-generated content in their own classrooms? How will they help learners to create using language, images, sound and multimedia?

Historically, the concept of authorship includes at least three meanings: an author can be understood as a text originator, as a concept or idea creator, and even as a publisher. Today these meanings are conflated in the online environment. With the rise of publishing platforms like WordPress and YouTube, young people now have the access to digital tools that enable them to create and publish content themselves. Sometimes this work may attract large audiences and even rival professional productions.

Text is no longer just words on paper. Text can be audio, video, images, interactive games, interactive websites, digital environments, software applications, and social media (Woodard and Coppola, 2018). With these changes brings about many needs for ourselves, as teachers, for our schools and standards, and most importantly, for our students. The nature of authorship is changing because of the ways that technology is changing the practice of reading and writing (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Digital authorship can also be understood as an extension of community arts practice, where the creative process of constructing media creates high levels of engagement that lead to personal and social empowerment (Cruz and Thornham, 2015). Ito et al (2007) documented the many informal learning contexts in which young people are creating media in ways that support interest-driven learning. For these reasons, it's no surprise that many middle-school and high school students aspire to become YouTubers when they grow up!

Recent shifts in education have heightened the importance of digital materials, digital literacies, and technology use in the classroom. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the College and Career Readiness skills, and specific English Language Arts (ELA) Writing Anchor Standards all address the need for students to use technology to produce and publish writing while also interacting and collaborating with others. Typically, these practices enable learners to gain experience gathering information using multiple print and digital sources and then integrating these ideas into their writing. By offering students a way to research, analyze, and create products and materials on subjects and topics they find authentic and interesting, engagement is increased and learners retain more information and increase their comprehension and understanding (Corio, Castek, & Quinn, 2016).

The International Society for Technology in Education updated their student standards that are designed to demonstrate the roles students need to practice within the classroom (ISTE 2016). Included in the standards are specific criteria and abilities students should have in order to become successful in the 21st century. These include the student becoming competent with the roles of being empowered learners, digital citizens, innovative designers, creative communicators, global collaborators, knowledge constructors, and computational thinkers (ISTE, 2016). Typically, these practices are defined in relationship to students as designers who identify and solve problems, practice communications skills, and express themselves clearly for a variety of purposes. Of course, educators and students must also be aware of the assortment of digital platforms, tools, styles, formats and types of digital media available to them. As students learn to use these digital tools to broaden their viewpoints, they increase their understandings by collaborating with others both locally and worldwide.

Both of these frameworks and educational standards reflect at least the beginning of understanding the ever-changing aspects of literacy development and literacy instruction. Although writing teachers have long embraced digital authorship as a dimension of composition (Hicks and Turner, 2013) and the concept of multimodality has become more well-understood in the context of literary learning (citation needed), the concept of participatory culture has dominated the academic discourse on digital media and learning. Some scholars have framed user behavior in online spaces in ways that privilege the out-of-school and largely social dimensions of communication but sometimes overlook both the connection to academic school content as well as the creativity, risk-taking, and careful attention to strategy and design that digital authorship entails.

In this essay, we reflect on two critical issues that seem to us to be important but sometimes overlooked features of digital literacy in relation to the pedagogical practices of digital authorship. Teachers who are advancing literacy in the context of digital authorship: (1) are attentive to the different stages of the creative process and (2) have a

solid understanding of the use of mentor texts and remix practices in relation to the law of copyright and fair use. We consider how these issues apply in the context of digital storytelling and show how a variety of hands-on pedagogical practices and digital platforms support students' identities as digital authors. We acknowledge the need for teachers to demonstrate tenacity in the face of some particular delights and tribulations of digital authorship as it occurs in the institutional context of schools and schooling. But before exploring these issues, we first address the use of the term digital authorship in relation to literacy learning.

Why Digital Authorship?

The term *digital authorship* is a concept that is used to describe the knowledge and competencies required to engage in the practice of creating media in a wide variety of forms as a way to learn. It incorporates both critical and creative processes and is combined with systematic reflection on the ethical, social and civic responsibilities of authorship (Hobbs, 2017).

The root word of authorship is the same as in the words authority and the concepts have been profoundly linked since antiquity. In ancient Rome, the terms *auctoritas* was used to describe people (both men and women) who possessed social power. The root word, *augeo-* means to augment or enrich. Literary theorists have noted that although storytelling and reporting are as old as time, the concept of the author is a modern figure, emerging from the Middle Ages and developing during the Enlightenment as people “discovered the prestige of the individual” through the publication of written expression (Barthes, 1978, 142–43). Thus, authors have social power and authority by virtue of taking risks to express themselves and communicate to a public audience.

Today, we have all become public communicators as we participate in digital culture. Developing and extending her work in media literacy education, Hobbs (2017) develops the argument that making media is a pedagogical practice that advances digital authorship. In *Create to Learn* (2017), Hobbs identifies nine different digital forms of expression and communication that can be productively used by learners to create and share meaning: blogs and websites, digital audio and podcasting, images, infographics and data visualizations, vlogs and screencasts, video production, animation, remix production and social media.

With its focus on creating real-world media messages for authentic audiences, the term digital authorship is aligned with but slightly broader than the term *digital writing*, which is generally defined “as compositions created with, and oftentimes for reading or viewing on, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet” (DeVoss, Eiman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010, 7). Digital writing pedagogies are often collaborative and multimodal but they generally center on written language. Digital authorship may involve writing but it's also possible that a composition may be fully nonverbal, as in the use of images or animation. Digital authorship also includes the creation of media forms that are expressive and performative, as with vlogs and screencasts. While digital writing embraces its disciplinary roots in writing and rhetoric, digital authorship approaches the practice of media creation from the professional practice of public communication.

The term digital authorship is aligned with but not synonymous with *digital literacy*, which is defined as an expanded conceptualization of literacy that is responsive to the ongoing changes in information and communication technologies that are part of

everyday life (Hobbs and Coiro, 2018). Digital literacy involves a set of literacy competencies connected to reading, critical analysis and authorship situated in a classroom culture of teaching practices that value, model, scaffold, and facilitate aspects of inquiry, analysis, collaboration, creation, reflection, and social action (Hobbs and Coiro, 2018). By drawing from a multidisciplinary theoretical lineage in education, communication, social sciences, and the humanities, digital literacy help educators develop the skills, competencies and habits of mind that enable them and their students to use digital media texts, tools, and technologies for inquiry learning.

When using digital media in the classroom for reading and writing, teachers and students can sometimes become overly focused on tool use. Teachers may seek use Google Classroom, Flipgrid or Google Docs as a result of curiosity as well as school administrator or social pressure. As teacher educators, we have encountered many teachers want to use digital tools and platforms but who lack a good understanding of why it matters to their personal and professional lives. While the use of digital tools is important, it is the motivations, instructional processes and dispositions cultivated by digital learning that that should receive the most attention.

Digital authorship facilitates a deep understanding of the creative process and it also enables significant opportunities for collaboration. Many technologies and platforms are conducive to collaboration and enable learners to gain different perspectives to support creativity. Hicks (2009) notes the need for a change of mindset from a focus on the sole author to an appreciation for the full potential of collaboration. After all, creativity does not occur in a vacuum. As we are a product of the environment and the life we lead, so are our ideas and how we come up with new and inventive designs, products, and processes. When we have experiences, partake in new tasks, and come across problems or puzzles, our background knowledge and new understandings can lead to creativity. In the classroom we provide projects and tasks for students to complete in order to learn and create. The instruction and time we offer our students allow for the possibility of creativity to ensue and flourish. As part of this process we create for scaffolding opportunities for digital writers we must consider the stages allotted for creativity.

Finally, digital authorship also explores the ethics of representation in relation to social power. An author shapes reality through representation. When students create media, they must consider the complex power relationship that exists between themselves as authors, the subject they depict in their creative work, and the audience who receives the message. For example, when a young learner selects an unflattering photo of a parent for use in a digital storytelling activity, issues of representation arise. Why was that photo used? How will the parent respond to this particular choice? Explicit discussion of the power of the author to shape perceptions of reality helps support students as digital authors and allows them to have a voice about what is important to them while providing a vehicle for empowerment, social responsibility and critical inquiry. For these reasons, digital authorship emphasizes media creation as a pedagogy for learning where the creation of digital content is a “creative and collaborative process that involves experimentation and risk-taking” (Hobbs, 2016, 63).

The Creative Process Matters

Although there are many components for providing support for students as digital authors, creativity is one that rises to the top of the pile. A good understanding of the creative process is important for educators who are interested in advancing students' identities as digital authors.

When we think about creativity, we may think of it as a property of a work product. Anything from an idea to a product or even a process can be deemed "creative." Some people think that creativity is something you are born with, believing that the criteria for calling something creative varies from person to person. But creativity is not a property of a work product, a glorified opinion, nor is it a personality trait. Actually, in the context of teaching and learning, these beliefs are problematic and actually distort the real complexity of understanding creativity as a learning process.

Psychologist and researchers have considered how to define creativity for many generations. Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 27) defined creativity as a process "that changes an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one." A key feature of the creative process has been called *negative capability*. This phrase was used by the British Romantic poet John Keats in 1817 when he explained how the writers like William Shakespeare were able to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty (Hebron, 2014). The creative process occurs as people enlarge their capacity to explore a problem, chase down ideas, and not follow a prescribed series of familiar steps.

With young learners in the context of a public school classroom, this may take the form of *messy engagement*, the chaos that comes from creative projects that tap into students' engagement with digital media, popular culture and mass media (Hobbs and Moore, 2013). Media literacy pedagogy creates high levels of motivation and engagement as students make connections between the classroom and the culture. But it also disrupts traditional school hierarchies that position the teacher as the sage of the stage. Talking about mass media in school, for example, raises issues about what's appropriate for children and young people of different ages. The best media literacy instruction occurs when teachers use inquiry with authentic, current issues that are occurring in the community and happening popular culture radar screen right now. This often creates unpredictable situations that require that a teacher be able to use improvisational teaching techniques, akin to jazz performance. As teachers play in harmony with student voices, they can trust the creative process and use their perspectives to deepen knowledge and skills in a climate of mutual trust and respect. For these reasons, it's important to resist the tendency to impose or follow rules and create rigid norms and expectations when creating to learn, which is why experts describe the development of truly creative work as involving "cycles of excitement and despair" (PBS Studios, 2013).

Teachers who gain insight on the stages of creativity can design learning experiences that enable it to flourish. Wallas (1926) proposed a four-stage theory of the creative process that insight on how creativity can flourish when the learner is given time for preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Each stage of the creative process are described in Table 1 below, with a suggested pedagogical application to the practice of digital authorship appropriate for secondary education contexts.

Table 1
Stages of the Creative Process Applied to Project-Based Digital Media Creation

Creative Process	Description	Pedagogical Example
Preparation	The problem is investigated in detail. Information and resources are collected and interpreted, while the creator remains open to possibilities and ideas.	A problem is introduced. After wondering and discussing, learners develop a question and use various search strategies to gather, comprehend and analyze relevant materials. Time for collaboration and messy engagement enables the capacity to develop original ideas. Learners use digital annotation to document key ideas as they gain knowledge.
Incubation	No active engagement is made to solve the problem or accomplish the task as unconscious processing is occurring without specific effort.	Work on the project is stopped for a period of time and learners turn to other topics or issues.
Illumination	As a deadline looms, the pressure to create enables ideas to arise. Sometimes there is a “eureka” moment with a flash of ingenuity regarding the problem or task.	Creative task introduced: express the knowledge acquired in the preparation stage to a defined target audience by creating a multimedia composition involving some form of digital media. Instructor supports student engagement without over-structuring the task. Students have choices as they design their work. Opportunities are provided for dialogue and discussion of possibilities for how to express and share ideas. Learners learn digital platforms and tools on an as-needed basis
Verification	Through analysis, the creator reflects on the quality of the work, making revisions or changes as needed, or changing course altogether.	Learners receive warm and cool feedback from members of the class and the instructor, who offer their insight on how the creative work is understood and interpreted. Learner revises work based on feedback. An opportunity is provided for the multimedia composition to be shared with authentic audience and social reflection on the learning experience occurs.

By understanding the four stages of the creative process, teachers can learn to allocate instructional time and scaffolding to allow learners to expand their creative side for tasks involved with digital authorship. Supporting younger students as they learn how to access information, explore ideas, ask questions, interpret and create are important steps in the digital authorship process.

Specific to digital creation, we must also reflect on the how elements of website, audio, video, and presentation designs, along with the texts that accompany them, are part

of the digital author's choice for expression. Elements like typography, underlying layers, sound, colors, angles, and voice over represent an allowance for how the digital author wants to present their voice, ideas, and points-of-view. Digital authors can use many types of digital tools to express themselves through the creation of blogs, vlogs, video production, photography, graphic design, social media, to just name a few. These tools change and improve regularly, but the underlying creative process remains consistent over time.

Mentor Texts, Remixing, Copyright and Fair Use

As learners compose, they may benefit from having access to models that they study and analyze. Using mentor texts in the classroom offers students experiences with different kinds of texts and allows them the opportunity to study how other authors selected word choice, layout, meaning, and overall communicated information. Mentor texts are used to provide structure or support to a learner as they create their own texts (Dorfman and Cappelli, 2014). But all across the lifespan, authors use mentor texts when they are developing content and expressing ideas in new formats. Your first resume was likely modeled on an example that someone provided to you. If you ever had to write a press release, you probably studied an example carefully to identify the formal conventions of the genre. Similarly, if you've created a video public service announcement (PSA), you probably viewed examples of PSAs to understand how to use images, language and sound to hold attention, engage emotion and convey important ideas persuasively in just 30 seconds.

Among literacy educators, mentor texts are often described in relation to print media: book, newspaper article, poem, or even a travel brochure. Digital mentor texts are now increasingly used in elementary and secondary education as well as in higher education settings. Blogs, digital audio, video, image, or websites serve as mentor texts because "in terms of new literacies, digital literacies, and media literacies, we must help students read like writers by exploring these new texts and analyzing them with the eyes of those who construct such texts" (Gainer, 2013, p. 17).

As authors compose, they also depend upon access to other copyrighted content that needs to be incorporated into their own work. For simplicity's sake, we will call this practice *remix*. It's a time honored academic tradition. For example, to write a academic essay about Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a writer needs to be able to read, select and quote passages from the book as she develops an argument and analyzes literature. To create a podcast review that critically analyzes the 2018 film *Black Panther*, authors may need to use some music, sound and dialogue from the film. To comment on recurring tropes in the *Star Wars* films, a digital author will need to use quotes or excerpts to illustrate her ideas and that author is completely free to choose any medium to express these ideas: print, video, image or multimedia.

As learners compose and create media, they have the legal right to use, quote from or excerpt the work of other author's in their own creative work. Without the right to use bits of other people's work in our own expressions, creativity and innovation would be stifled (Aufderheide and Jaszi, 2011). For this reason, the doctrine of fair use is an essential balance that protects the rights of users of copyrighted material.

It's important to note that, in the United States, mentor texts and remixes are both highly protected under copyright law. Users have strong rights to select and use

copyrighted content. Any copyrighted materials can be legally used in the classroom and no payment or permission is required as long as the material has been legally acquired. A copy from a library or one purchased from Walmart is a legally acquired copy. A digital e-book or a film downloaded from BitTorrent or Pirate Bay is not a legal copy.

There are three elements of copyright law that protect the use of mentor texts and remixes by educators and learners:

- Section 110(a) of the Copyright Act of 1976 enables educators to use any copyrighted content in face-to-face teaching and learning contexts and even empowers them to make copies for classroom use.
- Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 (the doctrine of fair use) enables creative people to use copyrighted content in their own creative work if they meet the fair use standard applying a four-factor analysis, considering the author's purpose in using the copyrighted material, the nature of the copyrighted work, the amount used, and the potential effect of the particular use on the market.
- Section 1201 of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 specifies that college faculty as well as kindergarten through Grade 12 teachers may “rip” video from copy-protected DVDs or works distributed by online services for purposes of comment or criticism in non-commercial videos, documentary films, nonfiction multimedia e-books offering film analysis, and for certain educational uses. K-12 students may also legally create copies of copy-protected works using screen-capture technology.

Educators and learners have broad rights to use copyrighted content for educational purposes, but for many, the topic of copyright is “scary” and often, it simply comes from not knowing their rights and responsibilities under the law. Copyright is an important topic for learners to understand as they engage in writing and digital authorship. Authors have the legal right to quote or excerpt the work of other authors without payment or permission under the doctrine of fair use (Audferheide and Jaszi, 2011; Hobbs, 2018). When students use images, words, music, sound effects or other copyrighted content in their own compositions, they can do so legally if they determine that their work qualifies as a fair use. Generally speaking, an author can make a fair use determination by using reasoning in response to two questions: (1) Did my use of the copyrighted work “transform” the original by using it for a new purpose or in a new context? (2) Did I use only the amount needed to accomplish my purpose in ways that could not be a substitute for the original?

Mentor texts can support a writer's skills by allowing opportunity for careful analysis and close imitation of the text. As learners study the text, they ‘try it out’ by modeling their creative work upon the work of the author. For example, a learner may focus on a genre like “blackout poetry,” reading the poetry of Austin Kleon, who creates poems by taking newspaper articles and removing words using a black magic marker. The words he does not erase become poetic expression (Hobbs, 2017). By copying this approach to composing poetry, students can create original work. For some learners in some contexts, a mentor text can also become the inspiration for a larger inquiry.

Remixes (sometimes called mashups) are creative works that are assembled from the appropriation and reuse of other creative work (Jenkins, 2013). By combining elements of other people’s works in order to create new ones, remix challenges the ideology that suggests that creative work emerges from the independent mind of the artist. When Kembrew McLeod (2016) deconstructs the work of J.J. Abrams, uses bits and pieces of this many films to illustrate the filmmaker’s re-purposing of older stories. As a type of filmic literary analysis, McLeod relies on the ability to select, edit and juxtapose bits of film scenes in order to develop his argument.

Some English teachers immediately jump to the word *plagiarism* when they encounter remix practices and research has shown that many teachers wrongly conflate the meanings of copyright and plagiarism (Media Education Lab, 2006). Long considered an evil in the cultural world, and derived from a Latin noun designating kidnapping, plagiarism is considered to be the wrongful “appropriation, close imitation, or purloining and publication, of another author’s language, thoughts, ideas, or expressions, and the representation of them as one’s own original work” (Gunkel, 2013, 85).

But great thinkers and writers throughout history have long acknowledged their debts to the authors who preceded them. For example in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1868, 543) essay, “Originality and Quotation,” he writes,

Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive ... that, in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity and by delight, we all quote. We quote not only books and proverbs, but arts, sciences, religion, customs and laws; nay, we quote temples and houses, tables and chairs by imitation.

We are coming to understand authorship in a digital age as deeply connected to cultural environment. In a world of ideas, authors use existing ideas. In reworking them, they stumble upon or discover new ideas. In a world saturated with media messages, including thousands of books and magazines, 500 cable television channels and millions of websites, images and videos, it is natural and appropriate to use these resources in commenting upon and creating new works.

In **digital storytelling**, it is easy to see the important function of mentor texts and remix content. When elementary or secondary teachers begin a digital storytelling project, they generally select a mentor text to analyze. This helps students understand the nature of the genre of digital storytelling. As Table 2 shows, a mentor text can help students analyze the relationship between the content of a story and its form and structure. As students prepare to create their digital stories, they collect digital resources for potential use in their creative work. When work on the project begins in earnest, additional study of mentor texts may be needed to “solve” certain problems that emerge during production. Careful arrangement and sequencing of images is needed in order for a digital story to be effective. In the verification stage, a teacher may even choose to use a student work as a mentor text, identifying exemplary qualities and thus inspiring learners and helping them develop a clear understanding of expectations for their work. For this reason, providing authentic feedback is a critical part of the creative process (Halverson, Gibbons, Copeland, Andrews, Llorens, & Bass, 2012). In Table 2, we offer examples of how

digital authorship involves the use of digital platforms and copyrighted material as mentor texts and for remix purposes throughout the creative process.

Table 1

How Mentor Texts and Remix of Copyrighted Materials are Used in Digital Storytelling

Creative Process	Mentor Text	Remix
Preparation	To understand the genre of digital storytelling, a teacher uses a podcast from <i>The Moth</i> and as students listen, they outline the story elements to identify characters, setting, rising action, conflict, resolution using Google Docs. She downloads a digital file to enable ease of use of the artifact.	As students plan their own digital stories, they select images to accompany their narrative work, storing the works in a digital file folder to enable them to access and use images.
Incubation	No focus on digital storytelling during incubation	No focus on digital storytelling during incubation
Illumination	As a deadline looms, students listen to another digital story from <i>The Moth</i> collection to examine strategies for increasing dramatic tension and suspense.	Students write their scripts and practice them. They create PPTs using a variety of images sequenced to carefully align with their stories. They use ScreenCast-o-Matic to perform their stories while displaying the PPT slides.
Verification	Teacher selects one example of student work and offers warm and cool feedback. These comments help to create a list of desirable features that emerge as a grading rubric. Students then revise their work in relation to the rubric.	Learners select different digital images after reflecting on their work and also add bits of sound and music as transition devices.

Finally, digital authorship can transform classroom learning spaces. In learning to incorporate digital composition practices into the elementary-level classroom, Mills and Exley (2014) point out that the physical arrangement of the classroom itself gets reconfigured. With the use of cameras, audio and video recording devices, learners begin to feel like digital authors, and act like them too. They gain authority and they start to think about themselves and their audiences in new ways.

Conclusion

The writing process can be magical: through it, we discover our thoughts and gain confidence in self-expression. When using language, image, sound and multimedia to express ideas, it is through the process of manipulating and engaging with ideas and symbols that helps us express and share meaning.

As teachers of 21st century learners, we must understand how the teaching of the writing process works. The use of digital mentor texts and remixing practices allow for learners to comment upon and reshape the many forms of media that are already available

to us. These are important ideas as we scaffold instruction to support all students in becoming digital authors.

Students of all grade levels now come into contact with a multitude of digital materials at a greater rate than generations before them, beginning in the earliest months of life. No longer just receivers of information, today's learners are creators, producers, and writers of meaningful, multimodal texts. So, while many elements of good writing instruction may remain the same, there is room for change and thoughtful considerations when it comes to supporting students with authentic, writing and authorship in today's elementary classrooms.

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