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## Pagecasting in the UWC: Writing, Digital Media, and Community Outreach

[Fall 2008 / Columns](#)

By **James Jesson**, **Paige Normand**, and **Andrea Saathoff**, University of Texas at Austin

### Community workshops in digital multimedia

As writing centers adapt to the influx of students with nontraditional writing assignments, such as hypertexts and other digital creations, the response of consultants and administrators has often been a somewhat defensive one. To some extent, writing centers must see new technology from this type of reactionary perspective: students bring in writing projects that their instructors assign, and consultants respond as best they can to meet the students' writing needs. But writing centers are in the unique position to take a lead role in developing technologically aided approaches to education. Therefore, in the face of adapting to the challenges of these new forms of writing, we have taken a proactive role in teaching students to write in digital environments. Using writing center methods and philosophy in a classroom environment, we have found that we can empower students to express themselves in digital media and, in the process, improve their writing in more traditional text-based forms.

In this article we describe a recent venture to incorporate a digital literacy component into the community outreach program at the **University of Texas at Austin's Undergraduate Writing Center** (UWC). Paige, the writing center's outreach coordinator, led workshops for local high school students, teaching them to "translate" their writing into multimedia compositions that mixed images, music, and voice. These workshops did not resemble the one-to-one peer interactions of a traditional writing center consultation, and students did not produce work resembling "traditional" writing. As we argue, however, these workshops in digital media followed core writing center practices and motivations. In educating students about digital media we encouraged active, process-centered learning and followed Jeff Brooks's model of minimalist tutoring, asking students to "[do] all the work" (173). By doing so we helped students become more sophisticated consumers of digital media by encouraging them to "write" their own digital creations, and we helped them to become better writers by asking them to consider their writing from new perspectives. The success of these workshops points the way to future engagement in outreach programs that bring writing center practices and technological resources to disadvantaged communities.

### The Pagecast Project

As part of the UWC's community outreach program, in January of 2008 we began a collaboration with two local non-profit literary centers that offer creative writing opportunities for youths: **Badgerdog Literary Publishing** and **The Austin Bat Cave** (ABC). Both are 501(c)(3) corporations that focus on

creating community support and visibility for young writers by connecting local authors with creative writing students and publishing anthologies of the students' works. ABC, based on the **826 Valencia** model, offers after-school drop-in tutoring, workshops with local writers, as well as on-site community outreach in underrepresented communities. Badgerdog works in collaboration with schools district-wide to offer semester-long creative writing classes after school. Interested in collaborating with these two youth-centered writing communities, the UWC extended its university resources to provide students a new, online venue for publication.

**The workshops introduced students to new technology that helped express their creativity, obtain a more visceral introduction to rhetorical and writing strategies, and personally participate in the creation of digital media.**

The UWC wanted to utilize the **Department of Rhetoric and Writing's Computer Writing and Research Lab** facilities to offer these students an opportunity to learn about digital publication, translate their writing to multimedia content, and foster more critical engagement with digital media. Following the basis of Kylie Pepler's **Scratch Project** in South Central LA, we believe that engagement with media production intrinsically leads students to "question their current observations and understandings ... and discover the conventions of writing and language of new media by learning the visual, semiotic, aural and technological literacies necessary to inscribe one's self into the larger participatory culture" (Pepler 152). To foster this creative and analytical engagement with digital media, Paige designed and launched a three-hour **workshop** to introduce students from Badgerdog and ABC to the GarageBand program and facilitate the translation of their creative vision into a Pagecast: a multimedia production with images, music, and their own voice recordings.<sup>[1]</sup> Since both literary groups are committed to promoting young writers, the students we were working with were already invested in their creative writing. The workshop was conceived as a means of facilitating hands-on involvement with the production of digital media, and therefore we encouraged the students' personal engagement with the process of constructing, editing, and crafting their creative vision by leading them through a process of rhetorical analysis necessary for their translation.

We began the workshop by introducing the students to the tools and concepts they would be working with by collaborating, as a group, to translate a short poem into a multimedia production. For the ABC group, for example, we translated Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." First we focused on the diction and images of the poem and brainstormed how we interpreted its tone and mood. We used this discussion as a basis for translating the poem's themes into music, images, and voice: we discussed how our interpretation could be translated into a musical genre and selected an instrumental background for our demo; we chose a person from the class to perform a voice recording in time to the music; lastly, we selected Creative Commons-licensed images and discussed the timing for their appearance in the demo. We then let the students turn to their own work to begin the process of translating their written piece into these three media. Writing Center staff and volunteers circulated among the students to help them one-on-one with both conceptual and technical issues in producing their translations.

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**and extend our writing center's philosophy to new audiences and also to create a bridge to a wider community.**

Translating across media is an inherently creative and analytical task which aligns with the Writing Center philosophy to confirm the value of the students' work by offering them an opportunity to closely analyze their own writing as we would any literary text (Brooks 170). Each phase of translation allowed us to address more explicitly the student's exploration of audience, mood, tone, and voice. To select the musical accompaniment, we used the "jingles" in the GarageBand podcast library, which are categorized by genre — such as cinematic, jazz, orchestral, rock/blues — and discussed how different musical selections would influence an audience's expectations and interpretation of the piece, as well as how each selection could reflect and enhance our interpretation of the poem. We then expanded this conversation to how we wanted the voice recording to fit with the music. In this context, the concept of "voice" is quite literal: we discussed how the inflection, pauses, rhythm, clarity, and emphasis of the reading could affect the meaning and interpretation of the poem. We practiced different voice recordings to demonstrate possible interpretations of our text. For each of these steps in translation, the staff of the workshop collaborated with the students and engaged them in conversations about their choice of strategies and offered tools for them to articulate and translate their creative vision, but ultimately the student was the agent and evaluator of his or her production (Brooks 169).

Lastly, since the UWC would publish their projects online, we discussed the importance of utilizing free domain content for the images they incorporated into their Pagecast in order to avoid any legal infringements. None of the students during our pilot program were familiar with Creative Commons and, like many, were uncertain of the options for legal utilization of online texts and images. Our incorporation of public domain material opened discussion about strategies for collaboration with other artists to build and enhance our own projects. By joining their own creative works to the photographs and artwork of others, the students were able to shift from being consumers of culture to producers of culture — a move championed by Lawrence Lessig, Henry Jenkins, and others. Through this collaborative approach, both within the workshop and the introduction to Creative Commons, we hoped to further extend these students' understanding of their writing community from the written page to a world of artists and intellectuals where they can discuss and collaborate to build and broadcast their own voices.

**Writing is a form of self-expression and projects like transforming a piece of writing into a pagecast involve learning how to use another vehicle for one's voice.**

The workshops introduced students to new technology that helped express their creativity, obtain a more visceral introduction to rhetorical and writing strategies, and personally participate in the creation of digital media. This digital literacy not only opens a new forum for creativity but also allows engagement in critical questions about the production of media. The students' enthusiasm, the sophistication of their projects, and the interest from local schools in further pursuing these workshops have bolstered our hopes for extending our outreach program to target more students from underrepresented communities. We see ourselves in a position to utilize our university resources and extend our writing center's philosophy to new audiences and also to create a bridge to a wider community. Other writing

centers have incorporated digital media into community outreach programs, demonstrating that this is a feasible and productive approach to working with writers beyond the university's walls.

### **Opportunities for expansion**

By expanding our concept of the traditional form of writing to include creative projects in the digital environment, we have the opportunity to reach an entirely new population of students. The UWC's Pagecast workshop is just one example of incorporating digital media within community outreach programs. Other writing centers, such as **Rutgers** and **Stanford**, have also demonstrated that this is a feasible and productive approach to working with writers beyond the university's walls. Rutgers University created "**One Block Over**," a documentary project on the bordering West Park Community. The project was designed to explore possibilities for using multimedia technology to engage youths' awareness of issues that affect their community. The initial pilot program, "A Day in Newark," brought students and faculty together in an extracurricular activity. The goal was to create interest in composing multimedia projects in order to strengthen academic strategies, including writing and revision.

In addition to our Pagecast Project and One Block Over, other universities are invested in helping their surrounding communities by offering summer programs. Stanford University has contributed to over 250 Bay Area Community Non-Profit organizations. Students involved with Stanford's **Community Writing Project** (CWP) research and produce written, spoken, visual, and/or multimedia projects that directly benefit local non-profit agencies. The former director, Norma Bacon, is an advocate for giving students the opportunity to expand their work horizons outside of traditional academic settings, and into "real world" rhetorical situations. Their work ultimately reaches a nontraditional audience and provides much-needed assistance and enthusiasm to community organizations.

As more writing centers across the country begin to utilize modern technology and multimedia in their curricula we see greater avenues to empower young writers. Even without extravagant resources, many writing centers across the country have found ways to be involved with surrounding communities with multimedia projects. It has become increasingly evident that both the university and members of the community benefit from this creative and nontraditional process.

Writing is a form of self-expression and projects like transforming a piece of writing into a pagecast involve learning how to use another vehicle for one's voice. As technology continues to advance, and as the use of multimedia becomes more mainstream, we intend to incorporate more of these new methods of teaching into the UWC's programs. The above examples show that creative work not only enhances a person academically but also can reach out to people who are not comfortable expressing themselves via the written word. More writing centers are incorporating things like podcasts onto their websites (**The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)**; **UW-Madison's Writing Center's Podcasts**; and **The Ohio State Center for the Study and Teachin of Writing**) and are approaching more projects with a multimedia lens, thereby increasing communication with other writers and the surrounding community.

### **Notes**

[1] We use the term *pagecast* here to describe the translation of the written page into a multimedia text that is (broad)cast on the Web.

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