# Writing Programs as Distributed Networks: A Materialist Approach to University-Community Digital Media Literacy

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# Writing Programs as Distributed Networks: A Materialist Approach to University-Community Digital Media Literacy

Michelle Comstock

This article addresses how community-university digital media literacy projects are redefining literacy, literate practices, and institutions. Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which emphasizes the organizing process itself, I analyze the shifting definitions of literacy within one particular university-community collaboration. My analysis demonstrates the importance of creating writer and producer identities for all project participants and developing networks of responsibility and sustainability through the distribution of expertise among university and community institutions. In order to sustain such collaborations and university-community networks, literacy workers and writing programs must challenge static forms of participation and expertise, as well as monolithic notions of literacy, and become more responsive to concrete literacy needs within our communities.

> *Networks and networking, within what I call "distributed systems," are the master theme of our "new times".… In these systems many small, efficient, and self-controlled local units act in fluid, flexible, and sometimes ephemeral combinations (networks, patterns) so as to adapt to and transform "environments" (contexts) to which they are integrally linked.… [I]ntelligence—control—in distributed systems leaks out of any "head"—centre—and is distributed across relationships; relationships of parts "inside" the system to each other as well as to the "outside" environment or context. Furthermore, the system, in its "urge" to "get in sync," continually seeks to efface this "inside"-"outside" boundary.*
>
> —James Paul Gee, "New People in New Worlds"

In "New People in New Worlds," literacy researcher James Paul Gee identifies a new model of community literacy based on what he calls "distributed systems." Although his article is a largely uncritical discussion of distributed systems—the benchmarks of "new capitalism"—and their epistemological and educational effects, Gee does offer those of us invested in the teaching of writing new ways to conceptualize writers and their communities:

> Old-style capitalism involved large corporations with many workers and many layers of hierarchical control.… In the new capitalism the hierarchy is flattened, the business becomes a distributed system.… Workers, too, become parts of distributed systems—parts of networked teams devoted to temporary projects defined by meaningful, whole, and complex processes with which all team members must be familiar, whatever their content area of "expertise".… Individuals are not defined by fixed "essential qualities," such as "intelligence," "a culture," or "a skill." Rather they are, and must come to see themselves as, an ever changing "portfolio" of rearrangeable skills acquired in their trajectory through "project space"—that is, all the projects they have been in. You are, in this way, your projects. (47)

Despite Gee's sweeping, largely unqualified claims, his points ring true for many of us now working in writing programs, writing centers, composition classrooms and community organizations that are highly project-based and ephemeral. Portfolio assessment, service learning, and experiential research, for example, have become part of the core curriculum at many universities. What I find most compelling about Gee's description of the new capitalism is how it might make sense of the changing nature of our institutions of literacy and our labor as literacy workers in university writing programs, writing centers, and community literacy centers. What happens when these institutions become networked as parts of larger distributed systems? What happens when they become smaller, more flexible units that quickly change and adapt to their immediate environments? What happens when our labor becomes distributed beyond the university setting into community service projects? And how does this distribution affect questions of writing program sustainability and teacher/student/writer subjectivity? While these questions are pertinent to any writing administrator or teacher, they are especially crucial to those involved in community literacy projects that take them "outside" conventional academic and disciplinary boundaries. I recently grappled with these questions as a participant in a university-community digital media literacy project, a collaboration that demanded new definitions of literacy, writing,

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and academic labor. While researchers in digital literacy have mounted a growing challenge to our traditional notions of academic writing, few researchers have detailed shifts in literate practices and labor within university-community digital literacy partnerships. To address this gap, I offer the following case study of a community-university collaboration among the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center Writing Center; a corporate-sponsored, non-profit digital media organization called Digital Landscapes; and students from my advanced composition course.

This case study will map the changing relationships and spaces of one particular digital literacy network, a network that continues to evolve through the university and area public schools. As Bruce Horner argues in "Politics, Pedagogy, and the Profession of Composition," we need to "rework the meaning and substance of literacy anew in each historical instance of its practice" in order to prevent its commodification (130). With its attention to the situated experiences of network participants, this case study will work against such commodification and instead reveal literacy's relation to specific students, teachers, and community workers. Thus, I frame the pedagogical and research practices associated with this project not as a set of abstract skills or commodities (a list on a portfolio) but as situated within a flow of contingent relations of power within a network. My hope is that this case study will help other university literacy workers better understand their own work and shifting university-community affiliations.

## Network Participants

Our community partner in the project, Digital Landscapes, was a network of Denver area community workers, media artists, teachers, and students intent on creating digital media forms of (and forums for) personal and community storytelling across the city's economically and culturally segregated populations and neighborhoods. Nancy Linh Karls, the Director of the UCDHSC Writing Center, and I first heard about the Digital Landscapes team while pitching our "Mobile Literacy Unit" Community Outreach Project to Adam Lerner, the education coordinator of the Denver Art Museum. Nancy and I had hoped to use the Writing Center resources and staff to meet community digital literacy needs, especially through projects already underway at the museum, in literacy centers, and area schools. Nancy's plan for the Writing Center was to decentralize it, granting it mobility as she moved consultants and resources out into the larger campus and local community. Indeed, while Nancy was director, the Center gained a tenure-track faculty director, fourteen graduate and professional writing consultants, an array of computer hardware and software, and a diverse clientele spanning all backgrounds and all disciplines. The university's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences funds the Center largely through student fees and has made clear its commitment through substantial budget increases, thus helping to ensure its sustainability. As Nancy was decentralizing the center, I was beginning to network my advanced composition class with community organizations. I wanted my students to both document and participate in local literacy projects and events and was hoping to create several sustainable, ongoing partnerships with area community literacy organizations. After two initial brainstorming sessions, we decided the Digital Landscapes team could help us create a larger network of digital media educators and artists. We decided to build this network around three major events or projects: the Denver North High School Digital Autodrama Project, the Media Learning Forum, and a community digital media festival.

Seven of the advanced composition students in my class chose to document in multimedia format some aspect of the collaboration: three worked on the North High School project, two on the forum, and two on the festival. In addition to coaching students on these various projects, I worked with Nancy to create Writing Center sponsorship for the project forums and installations. The impetus behind the collaboration was overtly political for all parties involved. While Nancy and I wanted to create new connections between academic and community literacy in order to share expertise and resources across institutional boundaries, Digital Landscape videographers Scott Slack and Scott Randolph were committed community activists who wanted to empower people, particularly youth, to become media producers. With academic and vocational backgrounds in film, the two of them were developing a curriculum to help students and community members write, pitch, shoot, edit, and design videos for exhibition at local festivals as well as online. Nancy and I hoped to someday use parts of their curriculum in the Writing Center for students and community members involved in digital media production. Before I detail the collaboration itself, I want to address and problematize two key concepts that informed our collaboration from the beginning—the network model of community literacy and digital media literacy itself. Both concepts helped us organize and situate our project both within the community and within larger disciplinary frameworks.

## Organizing Community Digital Literacy and the Network Metaphor

In the beginning, Nancy and I were at a loss as to how to conceptualize our project within the discipline of composition studies. While important work in community literacy re-

search (Peck et al., Grabill, and Cushman) paved the way for our collaboration, I could find very little analysis of project-driven community digital media literacy networks. In order to develop the project, Nancy and I reviewed several organizational models for community digital literacy programs. The first, a university center model, centralizes resources, such as university staff and equipment, for community members on campus within a designated university space and timetable. That wasn't going to work in the context of a multi-site, multi-participant project like ours. Also, top-down bureaucratic structures like this one consistently fail to respond to popular initiatives within existing community networks. As I was drafting this article, Eli Goldblatt's "Alinsky's Reveille: A Community-Organizing Model for Neighborhood-Based Literacy Projects" was published in *College English*. Goldblatt suggests that universities respond to, not dictate, community-initiated projects and that university workers adopt models that respond to the "array of demands on a stressed community" (276). His own New City Writing Institute responds "creatively and cooperatively to needs articulated by neighborhood organizations" (284). A second organizational model, the community literacy center, centralizes the resources within an existing community center (e.g., the University of California–Riverside's Center for Digital Innovation). Again, because of its centralizing structure, this model would not serve our project as it sought to respond to the multiple sites and mobility of community members. A third model, the digital consultant team, sends trained groups of students and other university workers out as literacy consultants to already existing networks in the community that need immediate assistance, not governance, in digital literacy (e.g., the University of Pennsylvania's Americorps Program to Bridge the Digital Divide). This organizational model is, of course, widely used by service learning programs but not so widely used by university writing programs and media institutes. The consultant team model supported Nancy's vision for the Writing Center, a vision that counters the traditional office-visit model of consultation and emphasizes mobility and adaptability to community needs. It also corresponded with my own professional/political motivation to include digital media as part of the writing curriculum by equipping students and Writing Center consultants with the knowledge and tools for writing in community digital environments.

In describing the digital and nomadic aspects of this particular project as it unfolded, a network metaphor was ultimately more useful than a community one. In our case, the terms "community" or "institution" suggested a more grounded, geographically identifiable space, (such as the Writing Center's physical location on the second floor of the Central Classroom Building), while "distributed system" or "network" suggested their own construction—usually in response to immediate issues and political pressures. Creating networks was a literate practice and academic labor primary to this project. For us it carried the political imperative of creating networks of public audiences, where people (and nonhuman elements, such as the machines and the architectures) worked in a nonhierarchical way to exchange resources and deliberate upon and solve social problems. The network metaphor, a metaphor many of us in modern society now largely take for granted, asks us to place our interest not in the actors themselves but in their relation to other actors, both human and nonhuman. In actor-network theory (ANT), a theory associated with Bruno Latour and others working within the area of technology and social relations, the term "network" was originally meant to capture a contingent and emergent form of organization in contrast to such notions as institution, society, and nation-state. According to social scientist Tuula Heiskanen, "ANT draws our attention to the manner in which networks are built rather than any given social and technical entities, which is often the case in the present-day discussion on networks

[e.g., WWW, network organizations, etc.]" (16). An actor-network is a set of associations or attachments; these associations come first, while focus on the actors themselves comes second. Throughout this case study, I employ ANT to highlight the shifting actor-networks between the Writing Program and our non-profit partners, between the composition classroom and the community, between private and public space, and between print and multimedia forms of writing.

Before I begin outlining the specific networking practices of the digital media literacy project, I'd like to briefly address the other concept integral to our project—digital media literacy. Indeed, our particular collaboration was created upon the promise of digital media technology for the creation of sustainable public networks.

## Old vs. New Literacies

For some time now teachers and scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have questioned "print-driven" linguistic and verbal approaches to teaching writing and sense-making in general. Thus, there is nothing really new about many of the "new literacies" (e.g., interpreting, reading, and producing images and multimedia documents or combining visual, sound, and language elements for digital environments). However, concrete accounts of how digital media literacy is defined and practiced within and across writing centers, classrooms, and communities are still in development. As one moves across disciplinary and community contexts, the terms themselves—digital literacy, multimodal composing, multimedia and new media literacy—become quite slippery.

Many composition teachers have or will experiment with multimedia classroom presentations, offer lessons on visual rhetoric, and encourage students to incorporate sound, images, and video into their assignments. And many of us have always taught writing as a multigenre, multimodal endeavor, intuitively noting how sense observations are integral to the writing and reading process. Yet in some academic quarters, such multimedia or digital media work has met with resistance, often from those of us or even those parts of ourselves who want to make the writing process a disembodied, linear, linguistic affair. Even as I write this, I wonder if I really have a complete handle on the principles of digital media composition. Throughout the digital media collaboration, I frequently learned applications and composing processes on the fly, taking crash courses in video editing software and in wireless networking systems. Because many of these community-based literacies—DVD development and presentations, digital storms, and performance-based storytelling events—contradicted my more familiar, contemplative modes of scholarly engagement and research, I often questioned their place in the Writing Center's or our Writing Program's curricula. Ultimately, though, I allowed myself to be swept up by the community project and its literacies, most of which moved me out of my professional and pedagogical comfort zones. Catherine Hobbs, an advocate of multimodal approaches to teaching, claims, "We are forced—at times by our failures—to grapple with the potential relationships between the ubiquitous and chaotic new visual and the comfortingly familiar, more linear verbal" (27). Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe also note the difficulties many teachers have in opening to new literacies:

> Our professional radar is tuned so narrowly to the bandwidth of print and the alphabetic—to school-based and workplace writing—that we miss a great deal of the interesting and engaging self-sponsored reading and composing students do

on their own time…. We also fail, as we deny the value of these new literacies, to recognize ourselves as illiterate in some spheres. And in this intellectual arrogance, we neglect to open ourselves to learning new literacies that could teach us more about human discursive practices. (676)

As I indicated above, the tensions we experience between print and digital media literacies are often the same tensions we experience between academic and community literacies. Jeffrey Grabill argues that

> the disciplinary focuses of rhetoric and composition and professional writing make it difficult to pursue work with community-based literacy programs. This situation results in a gap, a situation in which people in schools, workplaces, and community contexts may all be studying writing (or literacy more generally), yet they don't talk with each other. Crossing this gap seems important because it might result in a more integrated understanding of written literacies. (5)

And I would add literacies in general. For the purposes of this project, I have decided to use the term "digital media literacy" to refer to those literacies that utilize computerized media applications and tools, but as I will demonstrate, not everyone in the project used these same terms. According to ANT, the participants or actors on the research scene are allowed to unfold their own differing views of their network and its activities, no matter how counterintuitive they appear to us. Working with community organizations, like Digital Landscapes, forced us (administrators, tutors, students, teachers, and community workers) to constantly revisit the same "old" questions, like: What is literacy? What is writing? What is digital media? And who gets to decide?

In the following sections I organize the case study around three main project sites within the network—the Denver North Digital Autodrama project, my advanced composition class, and the Media Learning Forum. I give less attention to the fourth project site—the community digital arts festival (Artspace 7) because the Writing Program was less involved in the planning and implementation of the festival. However, the festival did raise questions about the nature of event-oriented community literacy projects and their overall effectiveness; thus, I briefly discuss the impact of Artspace 7 in relation to the other two projects. Within each site, I trace the network's shifting alliances and affiliations and highlight the actors' evolving and sometimes contradictory views on digital media literacy and how these views informed their roles in the network. It became clear early in our collaboration that in order to sustain the network, we needed to sustain an ongoing dialogue on digital media literacy and its significance to community. And in order to sustain such a dialogue, we had to allow our individual institutional identities and notions of literacy to undergo transformation toward what Grabill calls "a more integrated understanding" of literacy and literacy education, an understanding that was more responsive to diverse community needs.

## Denver North High School and the Digital Autodrama

One of the primary network sites was the Digital Autodrama Project at Denver North High School, a project that required students in the drama class to produce five-minute digital autodramas for presentation at the Media Learning Forum and the Artspace 7 digital arts festival. The following network participants worked directly on this project: drama teacher Jose Mercado; Digital Landscapes videographers Scott Slack and Scott Randolph (fondly called "the Scotts"); and a university "consulting team" made up of three advanced

composition students (Trish, Sarah, and Gillian) and myself. For five weeks, students and I acted as both tutors and documentarians on the project. Through ongoing observations and interviews, I discovered that network growth and vitality were dependent upon shifts in participants' roles and views on digital media literacy in response to each other and the larger community. I'd like to trace these shifts, focusing first on Jose, then on the Scotts, then on my students and myself.

During our first visit to Denver North on February 18, 2004, I sat at the back of a crowded classroom with Trish, one of my advanced composition students, listening to Jose explain the digital autodrama project to his students. Jose used terms from the field of performing arts and his own experience in hip-hop culture to describe the project's literacies and its significance to them as students, actors, and storytellers. He wanted students to create and perform a dramatic monologue or rap that would allow them to act and speak "from the heart." However, later in the project, Jose told us in an interview that he was convinced these video shorts would help students professionally beyond the classroom, as a kind of digital acting portfolio. At different junctures in the project, Jose offered two different literacies—one aimed at self-expression and the other aimed at professionalization. The shift in literacies corresponded with changes in Jose's participation as a teacher, a mentor, and a consultant within the network. As a teacher, he instructed his students on the art of personal storytelling, bringing in key examples from published scripts and performances and networking them with curriculum and graduation requirements. As a professional actor himself, he passed along his knowledge of the profession and what is required to transition from school to work. Thus, he explicitly provided his students with the tools necessary to network within the profession. Finally, as a community consultant, he was beginning to train other area teachers to implement the digital autodrama project at their schools. Through Jose's consulting work, the digital media literacy network—of which he was already a part—would grow and the project (including the students' "portfolios") would become distributed across area schools and districts. Jose needed the network of digital community artists and teachers to distribute his work to other teachers. He needed to create dialogue and relationship with community workers, like the Scotts, who offered the equipment and expertise necessary for the project and its distribution.

Unlike Jose, the Scotts were trained in film production and were intent on making the students good directors and producers of digital media more than actors or writers. After Jose introduced the lesson that first day, the Scotts, wearing t-shirts, caps, and cargo pants, entered the classroom with their digital video equipment and carefully outlined the key steps in the project—in five weeks (over four to eight class periods) students would "write a script, block it out, and shoot it." They would play with scenes, camera angles, movement, colors, and lights in order to produce their own video shorts. While Jose stressed authenticity and stage presence, the Scotts emphasized framing—both in terms of story and scene. Digitizing the autodramas meant more than simply videotaping performances. It meant writing and producing a scene or series of scenes for a five-minute short film. So while the students were instructed to speak "from the heart," they also had to get it down to five minutes. Further, what they wrote and performed had to translate to video. It required them to get behind, as well as in front of, the camera; to call the shots; then to revise and edit accordingly. These were the literacies the Scotts hoped to teach. It was their contribution to the dialogue already underway between Jose and his students.

Like Jose, the Scotts moved through multiple roles in order to grow the digital literacy network. They participated as both teachers and paid community consultants. The Scotts originally met Jose through a local public arts education program, where they developed the idea of digitizing the autodrama project, an assignment that was already an integral part of Jose's drama curriculum. The Scotts, both consultants for a multinational digital media corporation, needed a community-based literacy program in order to maintain their funding, and the Denver North class was a good match. The students already had backgrounds in drama and storytelling but needed more opportunities to acquire digital media literacy skills—something their school wasn't equipped to offer them. With the Bush Administration's refusal to extend the Digital Divide Initiative, which funded community technology programs, more community digital literacy projects were adopting corporate sponsorship. In 2004, the Denver Public School System, of which North High School was a part, was adhering to the No Child Left Behind Act. Public schools were losing funding and becoming charter schools. During the digital autodrama project itself, students were organizing a group called *Jovenes Unidos* or Youth United to charge that the school was failing them, claiming that they were underprepared for college due to lack of textbooks, tutoring, college counseling, and library access (Anas B-03). At North High, where "almost 85 percent of the student body is Hispanic" (Anas B-03), the 2000 graduation rate was 47.2 percent for Hispanic males and 61.1 percent for Hispanic females (Colorado Department of Education). While Jose had little expertise in digital video production, he and the school administration understood that these skills were important for his students and not just for careers in theater or television. As he explained later in an interview, he hoped the digital autodramas would address widespread problems in literacy among his students and "put tools in the students' tool belts from both traditional storytelling techniques and hip-hop culture." In a sense, we all were participating within a larger distributed system that required public schools to connect with private funds for programs like the digital autodrama project. The lack of a comprehensive public or private policy for closing the digital divide in Denver made collaborations with organizations like Digital Landscapes attractive and maybe even necessary.

As university consultants, documentarians, and researchers, my students and I also experienced shifts in our network roles and notions of literacy throughout the digital autodrama project. As a university worker, I hoped that by documenting our experiences at Denver North we would pave the way for future collaborations among students, tutors, and community members, both through the Writing Center and the university's Writing Program. Although the Digital Autodrama was important in and of itself, sustaining the network was of primary significance to me. While the Scotts needed an ongoing partnership with community youth programs, especially schools, to renew their funding, and Jose was intent on securing computer equipment for his school and training other area teachers to implement the digital autodrama project, I needed places to send my students where they could get hands-on experience working with youth on digital media projects. I understood that this kind of experiential learning would provide the students with concrete opportunities to contribute to the community and to test their own literacy theories and expertise within complex, diverse community contexts.

Although I was clear from the beginning of the collaboration that I wanted to network the Writing Program with community digital literacy programs, my definitions of literacy were far less clear. As I briefly mentioned earlier, I moved from a more conventional, disci-

pline-specific notion of literacy toward a more integrated, project-based understanding of it. During that first visit in February, the Scotts introduced Trish, one of my students, and me to the rest of the class. As the students looked back at us, I wondered for a brief moment what I, a writing instructor and composition researcher, was doing there in a high school drama class. Shouldn't I be at home or in the university writing classroom doing some real research? I had brought my conventional views of literacy, and more particularly "school writing," to the project and to the network as a whole. Initially, I understood my role in the network as a "writing" consultant—someone who would help students (both the advanced composition and high school drama students) learn how to write organized, well-focused pieces of writing, someone who would help students understand that writing was important to effective self-presentation and self-expression. However, even over the course of that first day, what I understood as "school writing" morphed into writing as a visual tool, as a way to visually organize or situate one's perspective, and as a more integrated and ephemeral element (alongside taping, editing, moving, blocking, speaking) of the composing process itself. After introducing us, Scott Slack began writing on the dry erase board: "Write one line, one sentence from your 'stream of consciousness' draft. The sentence will serve as a filter for your entire 10-minute autodrama." Later, the students would take this filter sentence and experiment with various points of view (a past, present, or future self) in order to develop meaning or significance in their autodramas. After some writing, students began sharing their "one-liners." "That's not what I'm about," said one student, who then elaborated, "People here at school think I'm a big pothead; that's not what I'm about." I began seeing the possibilities of teaching and tutoring writing via digital media and its grammar. What if in the Writing Center and in my own writing courses we no longer taught the "thesis statement" but used a more visual metaphor, like filter, something more accessible and tangible to my visually literate students? Students might better understand writing as a filtering device for their own experiences, as not only a tool for expression but a way to make sense of their relationship to the world.

> Yet in some academic quarters, such multimedia or digital media work has met with resistance, often from those of us or even those parts of ourselves who want to make the writing process a disembodied, linear, linguistic affair.

Throughout the following weeks, my participation in the network shifted from university consultant/researcher to writing teacher and back again. With each shift I continued to redefine literacy in relation to the project and the larger community. For example, I "networked" my advanced composition class curriculum with the autodrama project curriculum. Borrowing the Scotts' terms, I asked my advanced composition students to produce a "filter" (an image or insight) from their documentary drafts and to experiment with various points view—a past, present, and future self, as well as a collective and individual self. Later, when the Scotts interviewed me for a grant presentation to their corporation (they needed something tangible to show the executives in order to continue funding), I told the camera that I was committed to finding a new vocabulary for teaching and tutoring writing, one that utilized a more integrated, multimodal approach to communication and meaning making. Such multimodal approaches, I argued, echo the ways in which we in writing programs continually seek to recognize and deploy terms and metaphors that will allow different

ways of learning and knowing in the classroom and in tutoring sessions. My arguments were aimed not only at the corporate and community audiences (in the hopes they would see the significance of the Writing Program to the community), but at my own academic institution. Through my redefinition of literacy and literacy instruction, I was arguing for the significance of community digital literacy, in all its various modes and forms, to the university Writing Program and curriculum.

While I was working to network these various audiences, the three advanced composition students who were helping me document the project immersed themselves into the drama classroom, helping the high school students write their scripts, filming the filming, laughing and participating in the whole process. They would come back to the advanced composition classroom with stories about their tutoring experiences: "You'll never believe what Mike did with his monologue. It all started to change when he began reading and improvising it to his friend, and we got it on tape." Most of the high school students produced five-minute monologues on significant people in their lives, especially friends and relatives who had died as the result of violence or drug abuse. Many decided to talk about their own struggles with drugs, identity, and reputation. Sarah, another member of the advanced composition team, grew up in the North Denver neighborhood, so her participation in the network was informed by her own understanding of the students' culture and the difficulties they faced. At the end of the project she commented, "I just liked watching all the kids' narratives and relating to it and saying, 'Well, you have a hell of a lot to go through. It's not going to change.'" Although Sarah's comment might seem cynical on the surface, she established strong positive connections with many of the high school students and went on to help me develop a Web site, which literally "networked" the various parts of the community digital literacy program.

In an effort to show the effects of the project on two specific students, I include here responses by Gillian and Sarah to the Denver North experience. Their evaluations, written at the end of the semester, highlight their own viewpoints on literacy and expertise, as well as their own sense of the network and their participation in it. While Gillian retained fairly traditional distinctions among the project's various literacies (e.g., videotaping, editing, writing, interviewing), Sarah tended to see them as interconnected under the heading of "media literacy." Their views corresponded with their sense of expertise and level of participation in the network. As you might guess by now, the more expansive and integrated their views of literacy became, the more they participated in the project and the network as a whole. Gillian noted the following in her reflection:

> The Denver North project looked like an opportunity for me to become more familiar with multimedia…. I saw my role in the beginning of the project as being a "helper" to the two directors [the Scotts] and drama teacher who were already involved in the project. My role in this project has dramatically changed since then. Through trial and error our group learned how to use a GL2 camera and we began to document the Denver North Project with shaky hands and curious minds. At first I was afraid to interact with the students, but the Scotts encouraged our involvement and we moved in on the action. This project has taught me about different forms of communication besides writing. While we have used writing to outline our project, most of our research has been done with cameras and computers and editing software. Writing has helped to organize our project and has provided the foundation on which our documentary will stand.

Gillian's response points to the materiality of digital media literacy acquisition, the "shaki-ness" of using new tools of expression and communication. Such shakiness ("shaky-cam") doesn't necessarily interrupt a clear view of a scene or meaning but draws attention to the very act of looking and holding the camera. Gillian situates the camera, computers, and nonlinear editing software as the primary tools and sources of research for the project, with hours of footage and editing replacing the traditional modes of reading and note tak-ing. More than any other actor in the network, she draws attention to the influence of the nonhuman actors and her attempts to achieve intimacy with them. The digital footage itself becomes a nonhuman actor in the network, as Gillian expresses concern that it not just provide evidence of the scene (the actuality of the digital autodrama project) but that it also provide evidence of her labor as a researcher. Later, the Scotts use the students' footage in their own documentary version of the project, and I use it on a Web site publication and two conference presentations on the project. After the students themselves left the scene, the footage continues to play an integral part in creating and defining the network.

Gillian also notes how taking up the camera and "moving in on the action" changed her role in the project from that of "helper" to involved participant. The camera, another nonhuman actor in the network, partly enabled this shift in roles. It not only allowed her to engage the students by interviewing them—that is, asking them questions about their work and recording their responses so they could hear and see (and learn from) themselves—but allowed her to tape practice takes with the students as they blocked and re-blocked their scenes. Gillian went on in her reflection to outline the specific material conditions related to her acquisition of these new literacies. It is my contention that her acquisition is really a series of interactions (a growing intimacy) with the nonhuman technological actors in the network. In the following excerpt, she claims her difficulty in achieving intimacy with the technology is a personal instead of an institutional failing:

> Access and knowledge of technology have been important factors in our project. The fact that our group is somewhat "technologically challenged" has been the main source of our frustration. Limited knowledge has caused us to spend hour upon hour gathering unusable information, leaving us confused and disappointed. Access has been a factor that has limited our ability to progress in a normal fashion and has thus dictated how much time we have been able to spend on the project…. Technology has come a long way but very few people know how to use it effectively and to their advantage. At the beginning of the project I was intimidated at the thought of using technology, but now my intimidation has changed to awareness. I am aware of the different forms of technology available, but at the same time, I am aware that I still have a lot to learn with regards to creating a voice that incorporates multimedia.

Like Gillian, many of my advanced composition students remarked upon the lack of tech-nological access and knowledge necessary to create intimacy with the tools. The 85-minute class sessions made it difficult for me to tutor them adequately on the technical aspects of the project. What they needed were blocks of time in the lab for concentrated collabora-tive work. Although I opened more office hours for students to use my own computer and editing software, it was clear we needed a more accessible computer station or two in the Writing Center, where students could get instruction and support for both their writing and media needs. Ironically, students and I were working with community activists, artists, and teachers who claimed that youth (even those who didn't grow up with computers) have an

intuitive understanding of digital media tools. They would regularly claim, "[p]ut a camera in a the hands of a thirteen year old, tell him or her to tell a story with it, and they're off and running." This argument seemed idealistic given my own students' experiences (most of whom were in the 18–22 age bracket).

While Gillian clearly separates the various project literacies by dividing the activity of filming and editing from the activity of writing, Sarah situates the literacies and research methods under one heading—"media literacy." She also sees her own role in the project as a student of media literacy more than a "helper" or documentarian. Here's an excerpt:

> [T]his project differs from the rest [more traditional research projects] because the Scott(s) are truly adding the element of media. Thus, every in-class observation and even any sort of contact or conversation with the Scott(s) was research for our project. Our research involved finding and gluing the missing pieces of the project together, i.e. the purpose, the "so what," the "who cares," the "audience," and finding the "true story or essence" of this project. Through this journey, our purpose evolved into more than just capturing "media literacy" and the processes of—but what it takes to be media literate for both the students (who are learning and are a part of the process and the focal point of the project); the Scott(s) who are highly trained and affluent in the film industry; and finally, Trish, Gillian, and I who are taping and observing this entire process, but we are just as much involved in the process as we are the "primary evidence" in attempting to become "media literate."

Taking her group as "primary evidence," Sarah goes on to detail their production process:

> It was hard to develop a concrete outline because all of the filming was totally improvised. Through small dialogues, conversations, and interviews, the project's goals and purposes became clearer—not only for us but also the Denver North students. We had everyone's story but our own. After listening to the guest speaker from the Center for Digital Storytelling, we knew that our "voice" had to be found in order to connect and really tell the story to our audience. Through the workshops, in-class work time, outside class time, and other students' input, we were able to take a more precise direction.

Gillian and Sarah, like myself, were coming to terms with their own roles in the project. It was easy for them to get caught up in the high school students' work—helping them create and direct their autodramas. It was more difficult to see this work through the lens of a writing student or tutor. What did this work mean to them? How did it inform their own notions of literacy education? As Sarah mentioned in her reflection, she and her group relied on the Scotts for much of their research material. In her interview with them, I sensed that Sarah was hoping to answer some of her own questions: Why was this community literacy work important? How is this project helping students learn how to read and write better? I've provided excerpts of her interview with the Scotts below:

> SARAH: What kind of progress do you think this project is making? Has it been a success?
> SCOTT S.: It's been a success on many levels. With a project like this…with most film projects, success is measured strictly on what you get on the print. By that measure we're doing really well. The kids are working in conditions that can be

less than favorable, but they're also learning a lot. They're really engaging in what it means to tell a story…

Scott R.: …which is really important to us because we really feel that making something—the end product—is extremely important, but what we're really interested in is planting seeds for students who want to take this on as a career path or at least as a means of self-expression, to take back the media and become media producers themselves.

Scott S.: Self-expression is the key to self-empowerment.

Sarah: You've talked about this being a very effective project in these kids' lives, but what process in particular do you think is affecting them the most? The acting? The writing? Learning how to set up their own shots? Being part of the whole process?

Scott S.: If I had to pick one thing I'd say really it's all about the fact that they're talking about their lives. They're not just sitting around telling a friend; they have to think deeply about it, deeply think about how to tell the stories of their lives. And in doing that, I think they're getting a perspective on themselves that they don't get in everyday life. Watching themselves through a camera, through somebody else's eyes.

Although they don't mention writing in the responses above, the Scotts did talk frequently about the importance of writing as a method of control during the classroom workshops. Echoing Gillian, they often referred to it as an organizational tool. In my interview with Jose, he said much the same thing: "[W]hat writing is helping them do is be specific, be focused. If we can allow them to really think about their ideas and get them on paper, and if we combine that with the element that is instinctual, to get on stage, then I think that's where the stories are going to benefit." Perhaps Jose, the Scotts, and Gillian were referring to the more formal instantiations of writing, such as the finished scripts themselves; however, many "informal," ungraded writing practices were also taking place on a daily basis. Both the high school and university students were using "stream of consciousness" writing to generate ideas and to try out different perspectives. It seemed that writing was more than a focusing or organizational device but was a way to explore, experiment, and form associations as well.

Throughout their interview with Sarah, the Scotts worked to define their own roles, and later Sarah's role, in the network. Both Scotts stressed the overall benefits of the literacy project, with a focus on the process, on planting seeds for self-expression and helping students think deeply about their lives. Thus, they didn't seem overly invested in producing Gee's project-based portfolio person. However, when they discussed their own roles in the project, the Scotts represented it more in terms of production than self-expression, as a node within a larger distributed system, a project that will propel other projects, creating and expanding a network of literacy initiatives.

Sarah: Are you planning on doing this at other schools, or is this just a pilot?

Scott R.: We're documenting this project in order to inspire other teachers and college students, so rather than being a student who is stuck in a classroom, say at UCD, we try to get those students out into high school classes and duplicate the structure of what we're trying to do.

Here the Scotts not only clarified their own roles but also Sarah's role in the project, one that challenges traditional, "stuck" student subjectivities with a more mobile, productive tutor subjectivity: she, along with Gillian and Trish, was becoming equipped to do the same sort of literacy work herself. Throughout the project, the purpose of the documenting continually shifted from profiling the student autodramas—the stories of their lives—toward creating a network of teachers, tutors, and literacy workers and back again.

## Guerilla Film Tactics and the Advanced Composition Classroom

In this section, I want to elaborate on another unit integral to the network—my advanced composition class. Earlier I mentioned my desire to use the collaboration between my composition students and the Digital Landscapes team to develop a digital media literacy curriculum for use in the Writing Center and in future composition courses. As I did in the first section, I'd like to use the advanced composition class, and more specifically the course's documentary assignment, as a lens through which to trace shifting alliances in the larger network and highlight the various ways network participants' (including my own students) viewed literacy and their own roles in the network. Before we even began the Denver North project, I invited the Scotts to visit and introduce it and other collaborative community projects to my students. Students in the class could do their documentary project with any local community organization, and I was hoping the majority of students would choose to work on one of the Digital Landscapes projects. During this first visit, the Scotts outlined their community projects and explained their political and ethical motivations for doing the projects. Scott Randolph explained that their mission was to provide citizens, especially youth, with the tools for production, as well as train corporations (especially the sponsoring digital media corporation) how to be "better citizens." He said that many corporations want to know how to better use their money and resources to improve communities. His comment that we spend too much time consuming media and not producing it was met with nods from my students. We had talked in class about the "guerilla film tactics" of filmmakers like Robert Greenwald, who made *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, an exposé on Fox News' conservative political agenda, on a $300,000 budget in partnership with MoveOn and the Center for American Progress. The film, shown in hundreds of small screenings created and publicized by *MOVE ON*, uses large portions of footage from Fox News without permission and makes the clips available for download online, testing the legal precedents governing "fair use" of such material. The ethic behind guerilla documentaries and now blogumentaries is to put the power of the media into the hands of the people. Documentaries like Greenwald's require community collaboration and dialogue in order to achieve production and audiences outside of the mainstream media systems.

The Scotts planned to visit my advanced composition class throughout the semester to hold "guerilla filmmaking" workshops. As part of this larger effort to put media in the hands of the people, the Scotts had been coordinating these workshops, some running a day and others for weeks, with local schools and boys' and girls' clubs in order to teach young men and women how to produce, direct, and show their own documentary shorts. The workshops focused on camera and editing techniques, as well as the art and culture of storytelling outside the mainstream media. I was hoping the Scotts would help my students join this larger network of producers by creating their own community-based multimodal compositions and becoming equipped to tutor others. While I focused my course instruction on the research and written literacies of the documentary project, the Scotts agreed to instruct the students on guerilla documentary filmmaking tactics. Students would then integrate the various modes (text, video, and sound) into a single composition.

As I mentioned earlier, seven of my advanced composition students, including Sarah, Gillian, and Trish, decided to join the Digital Landscapes collaboration and, as a result, played multiple roles in the network. They participated as students (learning the elements of digital media literacy from the Scotts and me), as tutors (consulting with community members at each site), as documentarians (taping and editing footage of the various projects), and as community members (participating via the projects in their local communities). Thus, the Scotts were more than guest lecturers in my class; we were all collaborators together on several community projects. They needed us both as documentarians and tutors at the various sites and as "community outreach" subjects for their grant. The Scotts conducted camera and shooting workshops with the class, introducing us to the nonhuman actors in the network and instructing us on the basics of light, color, focus, sound, perspective (e.g., "The kind of shots will depend on how you want to tell the story"), movement, and *mise-en-scène*. After the workshops, my students took on the documentarian role, shooting video at various sites and establishing a regular (if not completely comfortable) relationship with the digital video camera. My students and I also met with the Scotts for instruction on storyboarding (a shot-by-shot diagram indicating angles, close-ups, and music) and editing—both were new forms of literacy for most of my writing students.

Accustomed to print-based outlines and argument structures, several of my students had trouble initially understanding or acquiring these new literacies. As I mentioned earlier, instead of a thesis statement or outline, the students made a list of possible perspectives and decided which perspective worked better to tell the story. The Scotts encouraged students to carefully choose a perspective—whether it was an "in-the-moment" or reflective perspective—and to consider how each would have different effects. "You're frustrated? Choose a frustrating angle," said Scott Slack. "Figure out where you need detail and what kind. A zoom or a pan." A later workshop on suspense with Daniel Weinshenker from Denver's Center for Digital Storytelling would help my students finesse their perspective into a narrative arc, a pathway for the viewer, as well as way of seeing. As they shifted back into their roles as documentarians, many students decided to experiment with point of view and voice in order to develop a more playful relationship with their audiences and subjects. I was delighted and suggested another visual metaphor for their revision processes: "Try seeing your writing as a kind of virtual camera control or as montage." The visual literacy metaphors had a great deal of resonance for many of my students, including those not doing multimedia projects. Writing was no longer a strictly cerebral, hands-off activity for them; it was one way, among many others, to make realities, to build suspense and relationship with their communities; it became a very tangible process.

Throughout the semester, the Scotts and I used the Denver North project as a case study in my advanced composition course to stress the problems of (and close connections between) production and delivery, that is, how a particular mode of production creates a particular audience as well. The ethical and political purpose of the documentary assignment I gave my students was to document and provide documentation for the "undocumentable" or what is beyond the "eye" (e.g., high school students and their stories of isolation and disenfranchisement, the poetic history and landscape of Denver, and the still buried, not yet blooming seeds of digital media literacy in the Writing Center), and to document the disappearance and reappearance of particular local stories—stories of disenfranchisement, loss of family, identity, and sanity.

At this point, I want to return to the issue of the nonhuman actors in this community-university network scene and focus on the media tools themselves. As Gillian implied earlier, using the tools can change one's relationship to the network as well as one's audience. With my advanced composition class, I traced how the tools themselves are already participants in larger cultural networks. As we know, video cameras, editing equipment, photography, and the very genre of documentary are often implicated in cultural practices of passive spectatorship and consumerism, reality TV, and war coverage. Many of my advanced composition students that semester were rightly suspicious and reticent to use such tools. One such student, doing a documentary on the push for a Tent City (an arts and living community run for and by homeless people) in Denver, argued that "images are the problem regarding treatment of the homeless. The written word will allow me to present the full picture." In

**They are humanized in close-ups and shots that show them engaged in the everyday, mundane tasks of creating a home—shots and sequences that defy attempts to disidentify with or objectify them.**

one sense, I agree with him. Most people are accustomed to identifying the homeless via stereotypical images. This student wanted us to see past these images, as well as the representational limits of photography. Having read Kaja Silverman, I also understand the power of the image to recreate our realities, to challenge our (dis)identifications with certain

images and not others. Silverman claims: "We need visual texts which activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies which diverge as widely as possible both from ourselves and from the cultural norm" (37). My student had instead decided to abandon the camera with its history of exploitation.

How, though, might one appropriate the tools that have historically helped to create a voyeuristic relationship to the homeless and the world in general, tools that have allowed a pornographic gaze toward war, poverty, and protest? In order to bring their relationship to these tools to political and ethical consciousness, students in my course used Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* to situate their projects within a range of modes associated with documentary filmmaking: from the poetic mode, where filmmakers use the camera and editing equipment to select and arrange their subjects (including people) into "associations and patterns of their choosing" (102) to the participatory mode, where the filmmakers take the camera "into the field" and represent what they experience (116). Students experimented with the kinds of gazes and levels of distance and closeness possible with the assigned digital media technology. The GL-2 digital video camera, for example, was not a neutral tool—it did not tell the truth, nor did it lie. It simply recorded a pattern of ones and zeroes yielding a display of light and color on screen. Every frame required a decision with little or no control over how it would be viewed. Like the student described above, some felt the camera impeded their ability to know and ethically represent their subjects. Other students attributed the ability to represent subjects ethically with film and video expertise or experience (we see the some of the same arguments regarding writing). They argued that one could not properly represent the subject if one could not properly use the tools of representation.

I tried to complicate this "expertise" argument by showing a documentary called *Dark Days* by first-time filmmaker Marc Singer. The film is a means for representing the everyday lives of people living in the subway tunnels of New York, as well as a vehicle for getting them out (all the proceeds go to the subjects, who were also crew members). Singer uses the camera, lighting, and editing equipment to create a casual, friendly, intimate relationship with the subjects. They are humanized in close-ups and shots that show them engaged in the everyday, mundane tasks of creating a home—shots and sequences that defy attempts to disidentify with or objectify them. While some students regarded parts of the film as direct advocacy for a particular group of people, they also recognized what Nichols would describe as a participatory mode of filmmaking, which uses the interview as "a distinct form of social encounter" and not as an investigative device (121). Such interviews dissolve the distance between the filmmaker, the subjects, and the audience and create an empathetic gaze. Sarah, Trish, and Gillian all picked up on the importance of humanizing their subjects and began creating profiles of two of the high school students at Denver North. These profiles, along with the general classroom footage, provided the "story" and gravity for their collaborative piece.

## The Media Learning Forum and Digital Storytelling

Telling one's story was a primary literacy in the digital media literacy collaboration and became an even stronger element during the Media Learning Forum. In February—soon after Trish, Sarah, and Gillian began documenting the Denver North Project—Digital Landscapes, the Writing Center, and two of my advanced composition students, Jill and Emily, created a forum for the discussion and presentation of digital stories and media projects, like the digital autodrama project. For the forum, we defined digital storytelling in practical terms—the production and distribution of digitized narratives that include sound, photographic, video, and text elements. In the following section, I'll demonstrate how the network changed shape, along with the participants' viewpoints on literacy, as a result of this third project site.

After several weeks of meetings with individuals and groups throughout the Denver metro community (including representatives from middle schools, high schools, other universities, artists, digital storytellers/instructors, corporate sponsors, and nonprofit organizations), the Digital Landscapes team, Nancy, and I decided that it was time to bring together these parties into one place at one time for the Media Learning Forum. The key presenters were

1) participants in the digital autodrama project,
2) participants in an after-school digital media program at Smiley Middle school,
3) Denver's Center for Digital Storytelling,
4) the Digital Landscapes team itself, and
5) the UCDHSC Writing Center.

Although each presenter had a clear yet distinct investment in digital media literacy, our aim was to provide a venue in which people could gather to discuss their past as well as current projects (including successes and challenges) and to assess the current state of digital media literacy use and application across the metro area. Our primary goal, however, was to build the network, to determine whether these individuals and groups could come together to share resources for future projects. Again, for both the Digital Landscapes team and us, the project was the network, not simply the individual digital media products that were being

produced all along the way. Nancy and I also wanted to use the forum to begin representing the Writing Center as a university and community resource for digital literacy.

Mikela and Philip Tarlow, co-coordinators of Digital Landscapes, were interested in holding this forum on the UCDHSC campus, thereby situating the digital literacy work within an academic/institutional context. Nancy and I, therefore, used our roles as campus instructors and administrators to provide space and resources for the network. A list of network participants was constructed from a previous, impromptu forum/gallery opening at a local community art center, and we added several academics to the list in order to give the network and its digital media literacy imperative a stronger foothold in the university. A Web site and listserv became our organizational tools for the event and the network as a whole. We profiled presenters and participants, listed location information, and made digital media literacy mission statements. As the forum date approached, participants added further participants to the invitation list until our Web site and listserv represented a highly diverse group of area students, artists, and teachers.

According to the Tarlows, the key to selling something or growing networks is to create parallel story streams and interlocking realities. They elaborate on this strategy in their book, *Digital Aboriginals,* which was written to convince non-profit and for-profit organizations that a whole new generation of literacies was on the horizon:

> We are witnessing the birth of a new generation, described not so much by their age, as by their actions in the world. They are using the freedoms of the new economy to develop a set of behavioral strategies: Digital Aboriginal. This new generation is driven, yet they rarely plan. They function equally well in the accelerated Net time of the high-tech world and in the empty spaces that tend to provoke synchronicities. Although brilliant strategists, they often chart their courses based on pure instinct. They are highly individualized, yet depend on deeply tribal ways of birthing ideas. In the guise of looking for killer applications and the next technical edge, they are leading a revolution. (ix)

Much like the theme park restaurants and retail stores we see in malls, the Media Learning Forum, according to the Tarlows, needed to create the sense of a story already underway, a movement without a "middle man." Thus, it was important to create a sense of immediacy—immediate production, immediate access. While the Tarlows were focused on creating immediacy—indeed, a form of time that seems to characterize our current sociocultural conceptions—there were other time forms working in tandem. The forum was, in fact, "slowed" by a number of complex situations, including the complexity of institutional entropy, where classrooms were built for dissemination and projection, not production and exchange.

In retrospect, we underestimated the agency of the forum site itself, the power of the architecture as an actor in the network. Worried that our less than logical campus layout would prove intimidating to visitors, we went about the business of creating signage that would direct forum participants to the correct room, hoping it would suffice. It didn't. As we began to set up in the lecture hall, we also encountered technical difficulty: the computer stereo speakers intended to showcase student projects wouldn't work. Several people jumped to the front of the room to assist, and ultimately we were able to get the speakers working sufficiently enough to project limited sound throughout the rather large, auditorium-style room.

What the community youth participants did have in the large lecture hall, however, was a stage. Five participants (three students, a faculty coordinator from the School of Education, and the director of Denver's Center for Digital Storytelling) from Smiley Middle School, an inner-city Denver public school trying to reverse its declining enrollments with special programs like the after-school digital storytelling workshop, were scheduled to present and discuss their digital stories. The stage served to showcase the work of three Smiley Middle School students, who projected their digital stories on screen and fielded questions from the audience. The middle school students readily took on the role of performers, describing how they had written, shot, and arranged their digital stories, which focused on a change they had experienced in their lives. The mostly adult audience asked them the same production questions they would ask any featured director. According to the faculty project coordinator, it was an empowering event for these students. We asked questions that prompted them to reflect on their writing and reading processes—material they hadn't previously discussed with the school's literacy researchers.

Despite its advantages in showcasing student digital media compositions, the auditorium-style room assigned by the campus for the event limited the kinds of participation possible at the forum. Participants sat in fixed rows, while presenters at the front of the room discussed the Denver North Autodrama Project, the future of digital media literacy in the Writing Center, and theories of digital media. The Tarlows focused on the importance of drawing a story circle in the sand, where people can come together within a circumscribed space for the sole purpose of sharing stories. Unfortunately, the university site hadn't created the story circle we had hoped it would. And we had fallen back on an assumption Nancy had been working to challenge in the Writing Center—let the community members come to you. The university, with its paid parking, labyrinth of buildings and classrooms, and academic textual corridors, prevented easy access and was not the ideal place for a network of digital exchange. Thus, the Media Learning Forum raised more questions about space and audience. What kind of site or scene would encourage more participation and networking? Where would we find our next story circle?

While our notions about networking and public/community audiences were being challenged, we also confronted changing ideas about literacy and power in relation to our discipline. Four of our university colleagues participated in the Media Learning Forum. Two were from the School of Education and two from our own Department of English. Our decision to situate our labor within the context of the Writing Center put it under the umbrella of "writing" rather than "English." It was also a move that placed our work within a service as well as research identity. The decision was a practical response to the nature of the digital media literacy network. In order to sustain the network, we would need a Writing Center workforce (students and literacy educators) that would provide instruction and space for critical reflection as community members produced their own stories and places within the network. To say that the event was solely sponsored by the Writing Center, however, would be misleading. The equipment students used to tape, edit and present the Media Learning Forum was rented via an English Department course—advanced composition. Moreover, my institutional affiliations or credentials—both of which become part of the infrastructure of the event—are with the English Department, not the Writing Center. The forum was a testament to James Slevin's point that one works with a discipline, not in one (48). For Nancy and myself the project prompted us to move from our positions of academic specialization to ones of multiprofessional cooperation.

Researchers in workplace literacy have concluded that multiprofessional cooperation works when there is concrete cooperation in which real practical problems, such as the digital divide, are solved and each participant reaches an understanding of the whole situation. The obstacles to such cooperation are both an overrespect for and an overlooking of disciplinary knowledge and expertise.

> The ideal would be for professions to do away with themselves by disseminating their knowledge or the fruits of their knowledge until there was no longer a need for their specialized knowledge. This path represents progressive advancement in solving the problem of a field where progress means going beyond the individual delivery or professional services, and trying to do something about the conditions that give rise to a need for those services in the first place. (Tiainen 32–33)

The problem, as the Scotts and I defined it, was unequal access to the media and means of community storytelling. Nancy and I had committed Writing Program and Writing Center resources to this cause, making the program part of a larger community network intent on storing and disseminating equipment and expertise. We hoped, ultimately, to build the network and to "do away with ourselves"—a sentiment that echoes the Writing Center mantra of empowering students so that they will ultimately become less dependent on us.

## Sustainable Networks

In late Spring 2004, the digital media literacy network changed its focus again, this time to a community digital arts festival called Artspace 7. The festival served to interrupt the usual patterns of mass media consumption. The organizers re-staged the stories, including work by the Denver North students and my composition students, in the middle of a suburban strip mall surrounded by a large commercial cineplex. The documentaries—all multimedia texts—were installed and projected on the windows of an art center while people passed by on their way to box-office renditions of war and serial killers. As I mentioned earlier, our network was aimed at creating producers out of consumers and moving audiences into more participatory roles. Throughout the digital media literacy project, participants not only learned the literacies associated with digital media but also experienced coming into and out of a community-based network and all that entails. With any community project, however, come questions of sustainability. By offering a series of low-cost public digital media workshops and discussions, Artspace 7 did move us away from the one-time only event toward a more sustained development of the habits and spaces of communal storytelling. How, though, does one sustain such a network beyond a spring and summer? These are questions Nancy and I took to the role of the Writing Program and Writing Center.

Artspace 7, in its ultimate emphasis on event and festival, was not where we wanted the Writing Program to go. While we understood the necessity of showcasing community stories, we saw more possibilities for the Writing Program in the type of collaboration at Denver North, where students, acting as digital literacy tutors, can experience working with and documenting the digital literacy acts of people in the public schools and community. The Media Learning Forum also taught us that the university structure, with its lecture halls and academic discourses on writing and representation (thesis statements, linear logics, and so on) can interrupt instead of encourage participation and dialogue. Since then, we have continued to work on developing digital media resources (computer stations, cameras, and tutorials) in the Writing Center and in our introductory and advanced composition courses, and Nancy extended writing center services and resources to include more units

in the network, such as a local newspaper published by and for people without homes and writing workshops held in a local women's halfway house and in a residence for formerly homeless men. The network also continues with ongoing collaborations between the Writing Program and North Denver High School, and the Writing Center and Denver's Center for Digital Storytelling. We understand that in order to sustain the network we must allow our roles, our forms of participation (from researcher, to consultant, to student to teacher), and our definitions of literacy to change. It is the network itself, the ongoing dialogue on literacy and its significance to community that must be sustained, not our individual institutional identities or any solid notion of literacy. Our hope is that the Writing Program can continue to extend the space of our writing classrooms and the university, to become more public and more responsive to literacy networks, to create more circles of interaction, where people can quickly and regularly engage in new information and communication literacies, in synchronous sympathetic exchange of photographic, video, as well as textual information.

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