

# Chapter 3. Three Student Voices on Technology in First-Year Composition

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## Reflect Before Reading

*How do you elicit students' thoughts and opinions about your FYC course? Have you ever asked students their opinions about assignments or asked if the course and/or assignments should be altered in some way? Finally, what policy do you have in place that concerns the use of cell phones and other electronic devices during class? How did you arrive at this policy?*

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Meet Rachel, Bethany, and Zachary, three first-year college students who are avid users of digital technologies. Each uses a mobile device to text daily, and each engages with and creates content on Facebook frequently. Rachel, an English education major, reads posts on Facebook daily and creates her own, looks through people's pictures, and uses the site to stay in touch with long-distance friends and family who are just some of her roughly 900 friend connections on the site. Bethany, an international business major, also reads and writes material on Facebook daily, and she uses an instant messenger online every day to chat with family and friends. She has roughly 300 friends on Facebook and often switches back and forth between texting and instant messaging within a continued conversation with the same person. Zachary, an English education major like Rachel, also writes on Facebook daily and looks at photographs on the site just as often.

As teachers, we know that many of our students have daily digital writing habits that look like Rachel's, Bethany's, and Zachary's, and we often talk with each other about the role such technologies can play in FYC. Yet in professional scholarship on the uses of technology in FYC, student voices are largely missing. As Susan Kirtley questions, "How can we know if our theories and practices are relevant and appropriate when developed without student input?" (210). In inviting you to consider the perspectives of three first-year college students on technology use in the FYC classroom, my aim is to prompt ideas for innovative technology use in FYC while simultaneously arguing for the inclusion of student perspectives in research on this subject.

At the time I interviewed them, Rachel, Bethany, and Zachary (all pseudonyms) were first-year students at a mid-sized public university who had com-

pleted their required FYC course; none was a student of mine, though Bethany and Zachary happened to have had the same FYC teacher. Each student completed a survey of his or her frequency of use of a range of digital technologies, then met with me for an individual conversation. Through these surveys and interviews, I gathered information about these students' non-academic digital literacy practices—the ways they use digital technologies to read and write for non-academic purposes—and their perceptions of the value or lack thereof in utilizing such literacies in FYC courses. Rachel, Bethany, and Zachary did not, to my knowledge, know one another, and my conversation with each was separate and confidential from those with the others. Yet commonalities emerged in how each of these students described possibilities for bringing their existing digital literacy practices into FYC: each argues that because technology facilitates ease in achieving course learning objectives, students should be encouraged to use digital tools in the classroom. Each calls for social media to be used to facilitate connections among students in a class. And each makes the case for why students, not teachers, should decide when and how students may use digital technologies in FYC.

In published scholarship on this subject, teachers report using digital technologies in FYC in two primary ways: by assigning multimodal, digital composition projects and by utilizing digital, social tools for FYC activities. The former, to my surprise, did not come up in my conversations with students. Though our field has experimented successfully with numerous ways of composing with and through digital technologies, these first-year students did not readily envision moving away from traditional composing methods in FYC. However, the latter subject addressed in published scholarship, that of utilizing digital, social tools for FYC activities, was echoed in each student interview. It is here—the use of digital social technologies, particularly to facilitate connections with others—that Rachel, Bethany, and Zachary see the greatest potential for technology use in FYC.

## Multimodal, Digital Composition and Social Media in FYC

While teachers' use of digital technologies in FYC varies widely, there are, as I have noted, two primary ways that teacher-scholars report using technology in the FYC classroom that are relevant to my discussion here: by designing writing projects that employ digital, multimodal composing methods and by facilitating community and connection among students through the use of digital, social tools. In two authors' work on this subject, we find rich descriptions of what digital composition projects can look like in FYC.<sup>1</sup> Daniel Anderson describes a digital project that gives

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1. By "digital composition projects," I mean any course projects that include the use of digital technologies in meaning making; creating websites, digital videos, or audio essays would all be considered forms of digital composition, as would writing a blog entry or preparing a set of PowerPoint slides.

students a great deal of freedom to select the technologies they use. Jody Shipka, similarly, defines a multimodal, digital project in which students choose not only their medium of composition but also their audience and purpose for composing.

In “The Low Bridge to High Benefits: Entry-Level Multimedia, Literacies, and Motivation,” Anderson discusses a pedagogical approach that gives students freedom to shape an assignment for their own purposes within a multimodal framework. Anderson assigns students to compose playlists: “Students create either a profile or a short narrative by identifying a set of songs that represents the identity of a person or tells a story” (47). This assignment provides a low-stakes introduction to multimodal composing for FYC students by drawing on familiar literacies of text-based composing and sorting music, while also pushing students to develop expertise in skills such as creating HTML links and understanding fair use of song excerpts (47-48). By providing a “low-bridge integration of media,” Anderson’s assignment gives students “an entrée into informational and remix literacies and can also open avenues that bridge audio literacies with composition” (56-57). In this way, Anderson uses FYC projects to expose students to composing possibilities beyond alphabetic, linear text.

In a similar vein of affording students choice in a digital composition project, Shipka discusses in “A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing” the “rhetorical events” her first-year writers compose, termed as such because they do not fit the strictures of “linear, argumentative, thesis-driven print texts” (282). In one such project, for example, a student interviews her classmates about their hometowns, researches features of those hometowns online, then recreates the websites she finds to incorporate images of her classmates (281-82). In this particular FYC assignment, Shipka’s students have the freedom to define the aim, audience, and media of their compositions rather than compose in ways that are confined by traditional expectations of academic writing. One student records a video, another compiles electronic sounds and images to accompany a paper, and still others choose to compose multimodal projects that do not incorporate digital technologies, such as a student who creates a quiz taken by reading a piece of paper held up to a mirror. Shipka demonstrates how her students still achieve common FYC learning outcomes while completing such widely varied assignments; for example, all students’ work involves incorporating voices from other texts into their own (286). Her discussion highlights the fact that FYC teachers can widen the possibilities for students’ use of technology greatly while still ensuring that students accomplish what they need to in a course.

Many other scholars report ways of using digital, social tools—often tools that are already part of students’ digital literacy practices—in FYC activities; I will highlight two such scholars’ work here: Nicole Emmelhainz’s work with a multimodal class blog and Abigail A. Grant’s use of texting for class activities. In “Status Update to Term Paper: Social Network Sites as a Medium for Collaboration,” Emmelhainz describes a class blog on which students compose with images and links in addition to traditional text and use the blog’s features to engage with each other’s ideas (100).

She writes that her goal in introducing FYC students to blogging was to help them “understand that the ways in which the technology supported the presentation of their ideas actually *enhanced* their ability to communicate, to make connections with their peers” (101). In a manner similar to Anderson’s approach with low-bridge technologies, Emmelhainz gives her students the opportunity to learn a new form of composing that does not differ too drastically from the traditional forms of composition with which they are familiar.

Grant also draws specifically on a digital literacy her students already practice by suggesting in “Textperts: Utilizing Students’ Skills in the Teaching of Writing” that FYC teachers capitalize on students’ predilection for communicating in writing through text messages. Grant argues that students frequently practice many writing process activities through text messaging. She writes, “Students want to write and enjoy doing it every day. They just do not seem to be very keen on writing in the genres that their instructors typically require. They text message, Tweet, Facebook, note, email, list, save, and edit” (250). Grant says her students think carefully about how to compose their text messages, even going as far as to write collaboratively with the assistance of their peers. Because students already consider written language closely within the genre of texting, Grant suggests that teachers use text messaging as a genre for in-class writing practice by having students write poetry that is confined to the 160-character limit of a text message, using this character limit to focus students’ attention on “editing skills,” and using texting as a starting point for a conversation about genre limitations and audience expectations, both in regards to the genre of text messages and other written genres with which texting can be contrasted (253). By drawing on one of students’ existing writing literacies, Grant posits that teachers can give students more agency in the FYC classroom, making students the experts—or “textperts” (248)—in a genre of writing.

The praxis described by Anderson, Shipka, Emmelhainz, and Grant only scratches the surface of scholarship in this area, as numerous teacher-scholars are bringing digital literacies into the FYC classroom, and many are linking specific course activities to students’ existing digital literacy practices. What the four pieces of published literature discussed here have in common is attention to who students are: to what technologies they are comfortable with, to the technologies they already use and may desire to use in the classroom, and to the value of giving students agency in choosing which digital technologies to use and how to use them. As teacher-scholars investigating effective uses of digital technologies in FYC, we can deepen such scholarship by acknowledging students’ perspectives on this topic. In what follows, I discuss Rachel’s, Bethany’s, and Zachary’s takes on what effective technology use can look like in FYC.

## The Convenience of Technology in Education

Rachel, Bethany, and Zachary had varying experiences with technology in FYC, though each had been guided by an FYC teacher to use digital technologies to

aid in class work. In Rachel's FYC course, digital technologies were positioned as a research resource. Rachel's teacher assigned readings in a digital format and taught the class how to use the university library's research databases to locate outside sources for a literature review, and Rachel also completed a project that required students to evaluate the credibility of several websites. She explains that the teacher "gave us an evaluation rubric and then you had to [figure out] what's the sponsor of this site, who wrote it, what's the copyright, is this credible, you know, making us start to question what we're looking at online, more than just trusting the average person." Rachel says that having to formally evaluate websites was new to her, but explains, "I know that you should always question what you read online, just because it's online." She explains that her preference is to work with print rather than digital sources but that she did see the value in learning to turn a critical eye on digital source material rather than "just trusting" that it contained credible information. Rachel doesn't mention cell phone use in her FYC class, though we will hear from Bethany and Zachary that phones were used frequently in theirs. In Rachel's FYC class, computers were only used when students were working on course projects, and given Rachel's penchant toward print texts, she was satisfied with computer use being somewhat limited in the course; she finds this to be "a good balance of technology and other things in the class."

Bethany and Zachary, who had the same teacher for FYC, used digital technologies in class in less formal ways. Their FYC course was thematically focused on music, and students in the course were frequently asked to watch and analyze music videos and compose song lyrics. Zachary explains that the course employed digital technologies in relation to these assignments: students used YouTube to watch music videos and iPods and Windows Media Player to listen to music related to class projects. Whereas Rachel's class involved technology use only within the academic realm—that is, Rachel's teacher taught students to use digital tools and gave them the opportunity to use such tools only in ways that academic writers typically use them—Bethany and Zachary's teacher reached beyond traditional technology use within the academy and prompted students to use digital tools they already use but to now use them for academic purposes.

Bethany relates that the FYC teacher also encouraged students to use any digital devices they had to connect to the internet as a resource during class. She says that the teacher "let us for sometimes if we needed to look stuff up, he's like, you know, I don't care, you can get out your phone, search, you know, look it up, and it's faster than, okay, I'm going to write this down, remember to go home and look it up." Bethany's description is one of a classroom without figurative walls. She notes that because many students have phones with internet access, the teacher often geared students to see that access as a resource that can enhance the work they do in the classroom. Both Bethany and Zachary describe their FYC classroom environment as one in which digital devices were often in play, with students using cell phones and computers frequently in class.

Talking with Bethany and Zachary about the role that cell phone use plays in their FYC classroom led me to reflect on how phones were positioned in my own FYC courses. Whereas these students' teacher encouraged phone use—and in doing so, demonstrated to students how the digital tools they already had access to could be used as academic resources—my own students at the time encountered a “Classroom Courtesy” policy on the syllabus that read, “Cell phones and other electronic devices should be turned to silent and put away during class time.” Talking with Bethany and Zachary got me thinking that perhaps my own impulse to curtail any digital device use in the classroom, in order to maintain students' focus and prevent distractions, was in fact denying students the opportunity to enhance their classroom learning by using these very devices. I will return to these questions shortly, to illustrate how these students' perspectives shaped my approach to cell phone use in the FYC classroom.

## Making Connections through Social Media

Because all three students text and use Facebook often, it is unsurprising that each looks to the connections afforded by these forms of digital communication for ideas of how to utilize technology in FYC. Bethany says that her instructor's policy of allowing students to use their phones to look up information could be taken a step further in FYC by encouraging students to text during class, which she has found to be useful in other courses. “My business class is like 200 people,” she says, “and sometimes you can't hear the teachers so you know, if you just text the person you know, without talking it, [you can ask] *What did he say?*” She suggests that when a class discussion or in-class activity is taking place—not a test or other assessment, she stresses—students could text people they know outside of class for input and answers or even text others in the same room. Doing so might even give more students opportunities to participate in class; students who may be reluctant to speak aloud in class or join in a lively discussion may be more comfortable contributing via their phones, either by starting conversations with others outside of class on the class topic or connecting with others in the room to share their perspectives.

All three students say they make connections through texting with classmates outside of the classroom. In her business course, Bethany and a group of other students exchanged numbers for this purpose. She says, “We don't talk, you know, we don't hang out outside of class but . . . we'll text each other, be like *Hey, what was the assignment in class today?* or *How did you submit your paper?*” Bethany has made specific connections with peers in her business course to facilitate her success in college; these are different than her social connections with friends, and she describes texting as the vehicle for making these connections possible. Rachel explains that she uses Facebook for similar reasons. She says, “[I]t's good for college in the sense that if you have a class with somebody and you need something, you can send them a message, and you're like *Hey, do you have this?*” For Rachel,

too, these are academic rather than social connections. Rachel describes getting a Facebook message from someone in her math class who she doesn't know, asking her for information about announcements made in class that this other student missed. Rachel explains that Facebook is "a very good tool" for purposes such as this one—she says, "[I]t is nice in the sense academically that if you need help, you can outreach to people in your college."

Rachel argues that the way she uses Facebook to connect with classmates to ask questions or talk about homework could benefit students in an FYC class. She suggests that teachers can use Facebook groups to bring FYC students together outside of the classroom:

[I]f classes formed groups on Facebook and then you can write stuff right on the group page, and share things, you could probably like share links or share this and that. . . . That would be really cool. That way, you know, outside of class, everyone's connected, because everyone has Facebook. . . . It'd be nice if anybody needed help with something, they could go on the Facebook page and say, *Does anybody know . . . this?*

In such a scenario, Rachel explains, classmates could answer each other's questions. In the same way that the student in her math class reached out to Rachel for help, Rachel sees the potential for students to help each other in FYC by connecting on Facebook, but her perspective suggests that many students don't readily facilitate these connections on their own and that FYC teachers could play a role in facilitating them.

Zachary also sees potential for his use of Facebook to enhance an FYC course. Students in his FYC course only used email to connect with one another outside of class, primarily to circulate work on a group project. But, Zachary explains, the group project may have been easier if students had had other ways to communicate. He says:

Say like in my writing class this last semester, we had one project where we did a CD mix where we, we had a group of people, we each picked songs and wrote up analyses for them. But if we were sitting in class and one of the people didn't send in their part of our paper and wasn't there that day . . . if one of us had had their Facebooks, we could have just pulled out our laptops real quick and gone on, see if they were on. . . . and say, *Are you coming? What's going on here?*

We can hear a similar value in Zachary's and Bethany's ways of describing a classroom without figurative walls, a classroom in which conversation is not limited to those who are present in the classroom during class time. As a teacher, I perceive a student who is absent from a class meeting as being wholly absent from participating in class for that day. Zachary sees things differently. For him, a



student's absence from the physical classroom doesn't preclude the student from participating in class, and Zachary shows how encouraging students to connect via a tool like Facebook would be one way to keep students present in the conversation when they are absent from the room. In further explaining the CD mix project, Zachary says that email was the only digital tool students used to keep in touch and that it was useful for combining parts of the project, but "other technologies could be helpful for like, *Hey, when do you want to meet up for this?* or like in class, *Where are you? We need you.*" Like Rachel and Bethany, Zachary points out the communicative potential that digital technologies could offer students in FYC. Zachary and his classmates could certainly have initiated their own connections via Facebook or texting, but they didn't, and similar to what the two other students have indicated, Zachary sees an opportunity here for FYC teachers to aid students in facilitating these connections.

These students' descriptions of Facebook and texting as ways to connect members of an FYC class highlight their desires to make connections with classmates that otherwise might not be present. Depending on class size, FYC students may not have the opportunity to get to know every other person in the room; but, if these students were encouraged to connect with each other via texting or in an online social space such as Facebook, they may take the opportunity to contact each other for class-related questions in ways they would not pursue otherwise. Rachel's perspective, in particular, demonstrates that she is interested in more than just individual connections with other students—she is interested in creating a digital community where all students in a class can connect with one another. As I will discuss shortly, listening to these students' perspectives led me to start creating Facebook group pages for my FYC courses, as I found that a class Facebook page enabled me to achieve the values that each student here hoped to gain through the use of digital connections among FYC students.

## Students Should Choose When to Use Technology

Underlying all of Rachel's, Bethany's, and Zachary's perspectives on technology in FYC is a strong desire to have some degree of autonomy in choosing what digital technologies to use during class. Bethany explains that although she would text during her classes, she didn't bring her laptop to any courses in her first semester of college because doing so wasn't encouraged by her teachers. She says that she would prefer to use a laptop for her classes because "it'd make things [easier], do your notes on the computer . . . so you can just take it, you don't have to worry about having ten different notebooks." It's not that Bethany's teachers said she couldn't use a laptop in class; they simply didn't say she could. Because her teachers weren't encouraging this technology use, she didn't initiate it on her own. In reflecting on my own classroom policies in light of Bethany's experience, I found that I took a similar approach as her teachers, typically telling my students what technologies they *couldn't* use in the classroom but not highlighting those that



they could. Bethany's behavior suggests that while students benefit from having the choice of what technologies to use in the classroom, we need to make these choices visible and explicit.

Zachary also sees potential for more technology to be used across all his college courses. In a Nutrition and Wellness course he took, for example, students were required to use the course management system Desire2Learn (D2L) for assignments but were not permitted to use laptops during class. Zachary found this combination of course requirements to be incongruous and argues that students should have been able to use D2L during class meetings since use of the platform was required for the course. Conversely, he had other courses in which he was permitted to use a laptop to take notes and chose not to, saying that "if I'm writing it down . . . I'll remember the information better." Zachary had thought closely about when and where the use of his laptop would benefit his learning, but he was limited in the agency he had to employ that laptop use to his benefit.

Zachary's overall opinion on the use of technology in college courses centers on student choice: he wants to be able to choose when and how to use digital technologies based on how they will help his learning in a course. But, Zachary says, he understands why some teachers are hesitant to allow students to use laptops during class time. Zachary says that his teacher who did not permit computer use during class "had the normal teacher fear [that] instead of us paying attention to the lecture, we'd be on Facebook." He says this fear is warranted: "I've . . . seen it with a couple of kids who have brought their laptops to [class]. As much as they're taking notes, they're also switching over to Facebook, talking to one of their friends." Zachary says he prefers to have the choice to use a laptop so he can determine when having one in class will be useful to him.

Rachel points out a similar concern, that encouraging cell phone and computer use in FYC might create opportunities for students to use digital technologies in ways that would detract from their learning in the course. When her class met in a computer lab, for example, she noticed that a number of students became distracted with social media online. "I think it's just a . . . force of habit," Rachel says. "You get on the computer and you just immediately log on Facebook for no reason at all . . . it's not like anything really important happened from the time you left your room to the time you got there but, just for some reason, we do that." Rachel says that using social media for class purposes "could be beneficial if kids used it in the right way and didn't abuse it." Both Rachel's and Zachary's experiences with students using digital tools for personal purposes—and in ways that pulled their attention away from the class—highlight the challenges we face as teachers in deciding how to construct digital tool use in the classroom. Do we ban the use of cell phones during class time, knowing that doing so limits students' use of valuable resources? Do we let students decide whether to use phones, knowing that doing so opens the door for digital distractions? Or is there some way for us to do both, to teach students to use digital tools to enhance their learning while making effective choices to avoid distractions? Though Zachary

and Rachel acknowledge ways that digital technologies can become a distraction in the classroom, all three students say that technology use can aid learning, primarily due to the ability students have to access class-related information online or in conversation with each other via digital communication. These students see the choice to use technology—and to hopefully use it wisely—as one that should be theirs, not their teachers’.

## Drawing on Student Expertise

As we consider how to best utilize digital technologies in FYC, we can turn to students for insight into what uses of technology and what particular technology tools will inform their learning in the course. Bethany’s, Rachel’s, and Zachary’s perspectives show that they are already reflecting on the role of technology in their courses in thoughtful ways—their opinions, along with those of other students, can help shape technology-enhanced pedagogies.

Speaking with these students has not only led me to revise my own practices of technology use in FYC, it has deepened my understanding of the wealth of knowledge students bring to the FYC classroom about their own learning processes, specifically how these learning processes are informed or augmented by technology use. As Angela Clark-Oates, Michelle Stuckey, Melissa Williamson, and Duane Roen demonstrate in their chapter in this collection, the practice of reflection, specifically on writing practices and processes, holds deep value for students’ learning in FYC. I see value, too, in the fact that students’ reflections can inform our teaching practices, as these reflections give us insights into how we can best create courses and classrooms that facilitate student learning.

One way I have drawn on these students’ reflections on technology use is by creating Facebook pages for each of my FYC course sections. My students post low-stakes writing assignments, such as reading responses, to our Facebook page rather than turning these assignments in in hard copy, and part of these low-stakes assignments involves responding to each other’s posts. Students and I also use the page for course announcements—students will remind each other when class is meeting in a different location for the day, and I’ll post information about majors fairs and other events on campus. The page also opens up possibilities for sharing and commenting on multimodal texts. In a class activity that asks students to explore campus and collect examples of graffiti, for example, students now post pictures of the examples they find to the class Facebook page, and we view them there for discussion when students return to the classroom. Some students have shared with me that they appreciate the convenience of writing and responding to each other’s work in this format, and others have said that receiving a Facebook notification each time a classmate posts something is a good reminder to keep up with their work for the course.

The Facebook page serves to connect students in others ways, too. When students in my research-based FYC courses create surveys as part of their research

projects, they post survey links to the page and request classmate participation. Students also use the page to ask each other questions about class. More than once, I've logged into the page on the morning an assignment is due and have discovered that late the night before, someone posted a question about the assignment and someone else shared an answer—peer-to-peer support that happens at hours when the writing center is closed and students know I won't be checking my email. In utilizing Facebook for my courses, I don't require any student to create an account. Those students who prefer not to use Facebook complete required assignments via email, though this does mean they miss out on the community-building aspects of the course page.

I've put Rachel's, Bethany's, and Zachary's ideas into practice in another way as well, by giving my FYC students autonomy to define how digital technologies will be used during class meetings. Rather than provide the class with a policy on cell phone and computer use, I now ask my classes to engage in small-to-large group discussion on the first day of class to define the parameters of this policy themselves. Across several sections of FYC, my students have arrived at a nearly identical policy: that each individual should police his or her own use of electronic devices, and that this use should never be a distraction to others in the room. Students have said in these discussions that they appreciate the opportunity to craft a classroom policy, and while I have still had to occasionally ask someone to stop texting and pay attention to what the rest of the class is doing, students have largely respected my and each other's boundaries in using electronic devices in class.

I encourage teachers to speak with their students, to find out how students perceive their uses of technology within education and how they might prefer to use technology in FYC. This conversation with students can take multiple forms. Teachers might ask students early in the term to discuss classroom technology policies or have students complete a low-stakes written reflection on the digital tools they use in everyday life and how they'd like to use those tools to enhance their learning in a course. What is most important here is that we do not make assumptions about the digital tools students use and their preferences for these tools. In creating class Facebook pages, for example, I've encountered a small number of students who are adamant about not using social media at all and a few others who have needed assistance in learning to use this digital tool for class purposes. Readers who speak with their students will certainly encounter additional perspectives different from those presented here. By continually asking our students to reflect on and discuss the ways technology is and can be present in their daily lives and their lives within an educational setting, we can develop FYC pedagogies that account for and validate students' perspectives on their learning.

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## Questions for Discussion and Reflection After Chapter 3

1. How do you use digital technologies in your FYC course? For example, do your students compose multimodal projects or other digital composition projects? What is your rationale for including these projects? What challenges, if any, have they presented for you in terms of design, assessment, student interest?
2. Have you tapped into students' expertise with nonacademic digital technologies in any way? If so, how did doing so inform your course design and pedagogy?

## Writing Activity After Chapter 3

Identify a wobble moment that you experienced as an FYC teacher. Perhaps it was a moment related to the use of digital technologies in your FYC course or a moment caused by your attempts to "work the tension" between what you are expected to teach (FYC's public charter) and what you believe you ought to teach. Reflect on this wobble moment and consider these questions: How did you contend with this moment? Did engaging with the cause of the wobble open up possibilities for you? Explain. Or were you unable to engage with this moment? If so, why was this the case?

## Further Reading

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