

# iBooks Portfolios: Interface, Audiences, and the Making of Online Identities

Thomas Peele and Melissa Antinori

*ABSTRACT: In this article, we describe a pilot ePortfolio initiative in which we asked students to turn their end-of-semester writing portfolios into iBooks, a project that grew out of our university's policy of giving an iPad to every incoming student. A template-based software for creating digital books, iBooks affords students the opportunity to personalize their portfolios using the same tools available to them on social networking sites (SNSs). We conclude that while templates are limiting, the kinds of templates that students use matter a great deal. When they make their iBooks portfolios, which use the same tools as those used at social networking sites, including images, videos, and hyperlinks, students have a much greater sense of audience awareness than is evident in print-based portfolios or portfolios that are housed on learning management systems. And, just as students create and curate their identities at social networking sites, they are able to use iBooks to create one version of an academic online identity.*

*KEYWORDS: ePortfolios; iBooks; digital rhetoric; basic writing; identity; social networking*

Working in groups over a two-week period, students share their knowledge as they build digital iBooks for their final course portfolios. They learn page layout and graphic design and make choices about fonts, complementary colors, and background images. Some students learn how to apply cascading style sheets to make sweeping changes to their books; others embed videos that are designed to play at strategic moments. Images (both original and found) complement the texts, and hyperlinks connect the portfolio to and situate it within a web of knowledge. When their iBooks are complete, students submit their portfolios by email and share their work with their classmates by syncing their iPads to the class laptops.<sup>1</sup> These students are basic writers in their first or second semester college composition courses.

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Through iBooks, the students are engaging in the literate practices of Web authoring, judiciously arranging text, image, and video to create academic online identities.<sup>2</sup> When students make iBooks, they use the same digital literacy skills that they use on social networking sites (SNSs). Perhaps because the iBooks interface is in many ways similar to the interfaces of Facebook, Tumblr, and WordPress, students mimicked the arrangement and delivery choices that they often make on these SNSs. We also suggest that this is one reason that, in addition to collecting and reflecting on their work, students often combine the media available to them on the Web and in iBooks to develop a controlling metaphor, frequently of a journey, connected to their interests and experiences. While iBooks do not force students to choose a metaphor, the interface—chapters, introductory pages, and preformatted, adjustable spaces for pictures or videos—allows for its creation in much the same way that SNSs allow students to create online identities.

Composition scholars such as Anne Ruggles Gere, Shirley Brice Heath, and Glynda Hull have argued that we should look for connections between students' academic and home literacies. And in their work on multimodality in basic writing, Thomas Henry, Joshua Hilst, and Regina Clemens Fox emphasize the importance of building on existing knowledge for basic writing students: "Most of our digital native students will respond more favorably to our teaching strategies if we help them build on what they already know, which includes multiple ways of composing in multiple modes of communication." Multimodal composing not only builds upon already existing skills, experiences, and contexts for communication, but it also helps level the playing field between mainstream and basic writing students and among basic writing students whose print literacy skills vary widely. For students who have been placed into basic writing classes and who often feel academically marginalized as a result of this placement, the opportunity to make a digital book that draws on their knowledge of audience, technology, and social networking is very powerful.

## **THE iPad INITIATIVE AT LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY, BROOKLYN: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**

In 2010, Long Island University began supplying every incoming student in good financial standing with an iPad free of charge. It was at the time the largest deployment of iPads at an educational institution in the United States (Lai). This program could potentially have had an enormous impact at an institution whose mission to provide an outstanding education



to students from all ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and levels of preparedness is often at odds with the fiscal challenges faced by both the University and its students. Part recruitment strategy, part retention effort, the iPad initiative was intended to help prepare students for 21<sup>st</sup>-century technologies and literacies.

Long Island University Brooklyn, located in Downtown Brooklyn, is one of LIU's two residential campuses (the other, LIU Post, is located in Brookville in suburban Long Island). The Brooklyn campus, which serves a population of ethnically and economically diverse, urban, mostly first-generation students, enrolls 7000 students annually (4200 undergraduates); the average adjusted gross family income is \$45,000; annual (2014-2015) tuition for undergraduates is \$33,018; and 88% of undergraduates receive some form of financial aid ("Long Island University" 131-32). Approximately 74% of incoming freshmen place into the basic writing sequence ("Long Island University" 42).<sup>3</sup>

Unlike those at many other institutions, the basic writing courses at LIU Brooklyn—nominally a two-semester sequence, although only about 15% are required to take the first course—carry three credits that apply towards the 128 required for graduation. As the courses meet for six hours each week (students pay an additional lab fee to cover the extra time), and instructors are credited with six workload hours, these courses are somewhat more in demand than they might be otherwise, although the classes are still largely staffed by part-time or non-tenure-track faculty. Classes are capped at 22, and, as there is no imperative from the administration that classes be full, some classes run with as few as nine or ten students.

While the University's efforts to help faculty and students integrate technology into their classes were well-intended, the administration did not secure faculty buy-in before they launched the iPad initiative. To our knowledge, no faculty were invited to participate in this decision-making process. No members of the English department faculty were asked to discuss how they might use the iPads or if they would be used at all. When the iPads arrived, faculty who received them were generally eager to put them to personal use—a valuable and necessary first step towards learning their functionality—but they were skeptical about using them in the classroom, and the lack of available training or support only increased the skepticism—and resistance.

As Director and Assistant Director of our Writing Program, we launched the iBooks Portfolio Project not because we were uneasy with the print portfolios that students were writing and that we had begun to collect for



assessment purposes, but because, relatively speaking, the University was awash in technology—and almost no one was using it. A year and a half after the start of the iPad initiative, we did not see the uptick in technology use that the University had hoped to create. Very few instructors in the English department showed students how the iPads could be used to access the library's databases or to submit work to the Writing Center for virtual conferences with tutors. No one was using any of the apps that had the potential to engage students visually in the creation of mind-maps or visual outlines. Faculty did not use them to better integrate Blackboard as a mobile learning device or to exchange essays for peer review. In other words, the list of ways in which the iPads were *not* being used was extensive.

There were some structural reasons for this gap. For one thing, as mentioned above, the administration that created the iPad initiative did not implement any faculty development or training programs, and instructors, many of whom held part-time appointments, were left to their own resources when it came to understanding how to use the devices in their classrooms. In addition, faculty lagged behind students in getting iPads for their own use; most full-time faculty had to wait until their computers were due to be replaced (generally once every three or four years), and most part-time faculty did not get iPads at all. Thus, early on, many of the instructors concluded that this technology was an add-on, something that the students could teach themselves how to use on their own time—or that would be one more thing to add to the list of devices, along with cell phones and laptops, that were banned from the classroom.

Students, for their part, told us that they had sold or given away their devices, or bartered them in exchange for baby-sitting services, or used them for some other purpose that provided immediate benefit. Since students were so freely disposing of their iPads, we can only assume that they were not required by faculty in any discipline, or, that if they were required, the failure to meet the requirement was inconsequential. Thus, we felt an urgent need to act, especially since our students were certainly, through some means, paying for the “free” technology and, statistically unlikely to graduate from our university, should be in a position to present their writing to other institutions in the hope of earning transfer credit.<sup>4</sup>

Our urgency also stemmed from what we were seeing in our writing classrooms. As Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe point out, “while time marches on outside of U.S. secondary and college classrooms, while people on the Internet are exchanging texts composed of still and moving images, animations, sounds, graphics, words, and colors, inside many of



these classrooms, students are producing essays that look much the same as those produced by their parents and grandparents" (1-2). Even in our highly unusual context in which students and some instructors were handed state-of-the-art technology for use in the classroom, almost no one was taking advantage of the opportunity. We discovered in the iPad Portfolio project that the limitations and affordances of the devices and the software provided a context in which students could, if given the chance, make use of the rhetorical skills they'd honed voluntarily on SNSs and apply those skills to their academic writing.

Writing Program Administrators' willingness to take advantage of existing technologies to support students in the face of faculty antipathy and administrative blundering might well be a hallmark of our times. In our case, the almost complete absence of faculty and student support allowed us to craft our own methods for incorporating the iPads into the curriculum. We asked ourselves how we could make the technology central to the curriculum rather than an afterthought; we wanted to use the technology in ways that would help students see its educational value. Students were already required to create end-of-term portfolios, but for a variety of reasons—including concerns about cost, access, and privacy—few of these portfolios were housed on digital platforms. The Google sites that students could create through their University accounts protected their privacy almost too well—instructors were outside the firewall and often could not easily view the portfolios—and in many ways they replicated too directly the format of the paper. As we discuss later, the Blackboard portfolio application offered so few design choices that it was little different from submitting a folder of essays via email and calling it an electronic portfolio.

The iBooks platform would provide a solution to these problems. It is free, and it could easily be loaded onto students' iPads. It requires the use of Web literacies—image, video, sound, hyperlink, and visual design—but unlike widely available Web 2.0 applications for building online portfolios, such as Google Sites, Wix and Weebly, the iBooks platform does a better job of protecting students' privacy because it does not have to be housed online to be fully functional.<sup>5</sup> Thus, iBooks offer an intermediate space between the fully closed-off world of Blackboard and the potentially fully exposed world of other Web 2.0 applications, a space in which students can make use of the identity-building practices common to SNSs while being protected from wider scrutiny. Perhaps most importantly, iBooks Author could make the technology a central feature of the course. Since iBooks have no print cognate, the iPad could no longer be seen as an add-on. Instead, it was es-



sential to completing the required portfolio. Without exception, students expanded their skill base in the service of making a portfolio for an audience that it was easy to imagine could—and sometimes did—extend beyond their instructors and their classmates.

### **The iBooks Initiative Pilot Portfolio Project: Start Up and Early Success**

For three semesters (Spring 2013 through Spring 2014), a group of three instructors worked with us on the iBooks project, for a total of five project participants. Students were introduced to the portfolio goals early in the semester, but individual instructors were able to approach the project in a manner that suited their interests and teaching styles. The first semester, two members of the cohort required iBooks, while the other three members made them optional. In the classes in which the iBooks were optional, no more than three students in any class took on the project, leading us to conclude that while students generally found this to be a rewarding and engaging process, they were unlikely to take it on unless it was required of them and more importantly they were given ample time and support for completing their projects.

Because the templates left a space for a photograph on the cover of the book and at the beginning of each chapter, students were asked to supply a photograph, either original or from the Web. Since these were books, they also required a title. No specific instructions were provided on the kinds of titles and images that students had to provide, but students were asked to think about how these elements would complement their texts. Because the platform allowed for it, students were given the option of including videos and/or hyperlinks in their text. Most of the students in classes that required iBooks completed the portfolios with a very high level of success, as we describe later in the article.

In our assessment of the iBooks Portfolio Project, which coincided with our general Writing Program assessment in the spring of 2014, we noted two major trends. We learned in our faculty meetings and in our assessment of print-, iBook-, and Blackboard-based portfolios that students were using the iBooks portfolios not only to collect their academic work but also to add a narrative element in order to build an online academic identity. This identity was evident in the books' titles, almost all of which relied on a metaphor of students' movement through physical space, as well as chapter headings, image selection, and students' reflections on their writing. In most cases,



the titles included references to a journey or to a climb. While some students used these metaphors to visually and textually guide their readers through their portfolios, others made explicit connections between the work they did in the class and journeys they had taken in their lives. In these examples, students equated their essays with various stages of these journeys, thereby personalizing their portfolios in ways that we did not see in Blackboard or print portfolios. In our review of portfolios from all sections of composition—both those that were a part of the iBook Portfolio project and conventional courses—we learned that students who made iBooks used the same strategies for constructing identities that we all do on SNSs. Through combined images and text, students told stories about themselves and their work—that is, they framed their academic work, here their text-based essays, within a personal narrative in order to engage and enlighten their readers, both real and potential. Students who made print- or Blackboard-based portfolios, on the other hand, very rarely used a controlling metaphor or even a simple title to frame their collected work; they seemed unconcerned with guiding their readers through their portfolios, telling a coherent story about their work, or building their identities as students.

While the technology to create these digital books is beyond the means of many basic writing students and the budgets of many writing programs, we offer our example of the iBooks portfolio as one way to achieve the positive outcomes associated with ePortfolios. When students create iBooks, they participate in an economy of writing that broadens the range of semiotic resources available to them and that builds on the textual arrangement, audience awareness, and identity construction that they have developed on SNSs.

### **Digital Portfolios, Templates, and the Construction of Online Identities**

In many ways, our experience is in keeping with substantial research that demonstrates the value of digital portfolios in mainstream composition courses, particularly as it relates to student learning, engagement, and retention (see Cambridge, Cambridge, and Yancey; Enyon; Knight, Hakel and Gromko; Enyon, Gambino, and Török). Though this work does not always specifically address basic writing students, scholarship in the field shows that the student engagement made possible through ePortfolios is evident in increased rates of student persistence and success.

The digital portfolios that these scholars describe take a variety of forms. Some of the portfolios rely heavily on templates: students have little



to no choice at all in how their portfolios look. In other cases, students have more control over the portfolios' final presentation. In the case of iBooks, students do have considerable control over how their portfolios appear, but that control is mediated by the available templates. Those templates shape the appearance of the individual chapters—the arrangement of text, image, sound, and video—as well as the overarching idea of a book as a container. The issue of the template—the interface between the writer and the text—has been addressed by Kathleen Yancey, who has expressed concern about students' reliance on templates. Yancey argues that if students rely on templates, they “learn only to *fill up* those templates and *fill in* those electric boxes,” which, she writes, in terms of intellectual work, is the “moral equivalent of the dots on a multiple choice text.” Yancey is rightly concerned that if students rely on templates they “will not compose and create, making use of all the means of persuasion and all the possible resources thereto; rather, they will complete someone else's software package; they will be the invention of that package” (“Made” 320).

Given this concern about students' reliance on templates, how do we decide how much of the design responsibility lies with students and how much lies with the package itself? Although we share these concerns about the potentially coercive effects of templates, we also recognize that, pragmatically, for all but a very few students, building an online identity means creating it within the confines of templates and adapting already-existing designs to suit their purposes. Most SNSs, for example, allow minimal control over design—“Facebook blue” has become identified as a palette color—and sites like Tumblr (or even the free versions of WordPress and Google sites) have users selecting from a variety of templates that are more-or-less instantly recognizable.

We agree with Yancey that students *do* need to learn the technology, and they need it to learn it as a part of the broader curricular aims of the composition course. The technological aspect of the assignment cannot be added on as an after-thought but should be a central concern of the rhetorical aims of any assignment. To make the claim that the technology is unimportant to the assignment is to make the argument that the method of delivering the message is inconsequential. However, we also can think of no practical alternative to the kinds of templates that are familiar to students. From our experiences in the classroom, we have learned that students are intimidated when faced with having to manipulate templates that are more complex than the drag-and-drop interfaces of Facebook. As danah boyd has shown, millennial students are not “digital natives,” and, like everyone



else, they must learn how to manipulate complex interfaces. While we developed strategies over the three-semester project to teach students, in forty-five minutes, the basics of how to use iBooks templates, we cannot imagine having the time, in an introductory class, to teach students how to build their digital projects without relying on any pre-formatted templates. While iBooks does provide ready-made templates, we argue below that it also allows users to alter the templates much more comprehensively than the Blackboard portfolio platform (which, during this pilot program, was available as an alternative to iBooks as a digital portfolio option). Students can build significantly more nuanced, informative, and visually interesting identities on the iBooks platform.

To some extent, students are already aware of the limitations of the templates and the possibilities they afford for design and rhetorical choice. One student wrote a rhetorical analysis of her own Facebook page, which she discusses in her iBook portfolio cover letter:

My Facebook page has the same format as everyone else page, because we don't really have control of our fonts and the colors of our Facebook page. But we do however have control over our default pictures as well as our cover page. My modeling Facebook page I would have to say is because as many of you all know Facebook doesn't really give us all that freedom of changing the fonts, formats, and sizes of the page. But I however consider my page to be unique due to the reasons that I don't just only use it to communicate with my friends, families, and other modeling business. But I feel like I really do portray a lot of stuff on it.

In her reflection, the student tells us that she understands the very limited range of formatting options that Facebook makes available, but that what makes her page unique is that it is aimed at multiple audiences. Although the writer does not say who those audiences are, she makes clear that she does not use it just to communicate with her friends or family (though this audience does not seem to be excluded) but to portray an image of herself. The student demonstrates a high level of audience awareness and an understanding that she can reach that audience through the formatting available through the SNS.

Furthermore, even as Web design results more and more from pre-formatted templates, there are a variety of features that students *do* have control over in iBooks. Tiani Kennedy, a graduate teaching assistant who



participated in the iBooks project, identified in the instructions she wrote for her students a number of choices they had to make: creating chapters, sections and pages; changing background color; adding a text box and changing the font; adding images (the students' own and from the Internet); creating hyperlinks; and adding video. Some students were able to make changes to the code. Even working within a template, then, students do have considerable control over the look and feel of their texts. A glance at images of iBook libraries on the Web shows the variety of possibilities that this platform affords students.

Templates, as interfaces that make composing possible for students with little experience with computer science, also have their defenders. Daniel Anderson, in his early work on multimedia composition, does not explicitly advocate for students' use of templates in their multimedia projects, but he does argue that a technology's simplicity is not a marker of its value: "these entry-level composers are able to create viable new media projects so it can't be argued that less functionality and more ease of use necessarily limit literacy. In fact, the relationship between complexity and literacy is fraught with tensions." He advocates teaching students how to produce entry-level new media as a method both for engaging critical thought and for demystifying, through practice, the technologies they use to receive information.

James Porter makes a similar point about "mechanical procedures" in this discussion of *techne*.

Rhetoric, as *techne*, is the art of creating discourse . . . to achieve a desired end for some audience. . . . It becomes degraded when it is taught or practiced as a set of *mechanical* procedures, rules or formulas to be followed or patterns to be copied. It achieves status as a true art when it is taught and practiced as a form of knowledge involving a critical understanding of the purposes and effects of the art on audiences and the practical know-how to achieve those effects in new discursive situations. (210)

Like Yancey, Porter is not specific about the procedures that he references, perhaps because a too-specific definition of these procedures would limit the uses of the conceptual work he provides. For our purposes, we believe that these procedures might include teaching students to use templates, as we have done in our iBooks project, in order to help them gain the tools to both understand the rhetorical effects of their design decisions and to conceptualize and reach their audiences. He makes the point more forcefully a



few lines later: “I often see humanist academics committing a different kind of fallacy: dismissing technical knowledge too readily as mindless mechanics or robotic functions, failing to see the importance of technical know-how to rhetorical competency. One cannot be an effective digital writer without knowing both technical procedures and how to deploy them to achieve the desired end” (211). Porter, then, is not talking about merely teaching students *how* to complete templates, but rather pointing out the importance of asking them to achieve significantly more.

Part of that achievement is creating an online academic identity in addition to the social one they already have. In his study of identity formation on SNSs, José van Dijck analyzes “how the struggle between users and platforms to control online identities is played out at the level of the *interface*” (200). van Dijck argues that the recent changes to the Facebook interface have changed it from a database of “personal information” to a tool for “(personal) *storytelling* and *narrative* self-presentation” (200). Students use the same strategies in their constructions of iBooks. The most successful of the iBooks—those that are both most engaging to their audiences and effectively present their academic work—rely on a personal, narrative structure that was neither required nor taught. One student, an artist, created an original background image from a photograph of herself and included in her text pictures of food she ate. This background image, far from being distracting, presented the reader with multiple images of the text superimposed on an image of her face, and the food images helped her make her argument about the potential health risks a vegetarian diet might pose for women, an argument that was partially rooted in her own story of becoming a vegetarian. No attentive reader could fail to notice that this writer had taken a bold step to personalize her academic work.

Describing the timeline feature of Facebook that was introduced in 2011 and is currently still the main organizing principle of data on the site, van Dijck writes that the “most significant ordering principle of the new interface layout is a vertical bar on the right indicating a chronological order from the present to the past” (204). The timeline feature also orders previously posted material so that it’s presented sequentially. The result, as van Dijck writes, is “a construction in hindsight, a retroactive ordering of life events at one moment in time” (205). Furthermore, van Dijck writes that “transforming a database into a narrative requires not only adding new data to already existing content, it also triggers a new awareness of *how* you want your life story told, *to whom* and *for what purpose*” (205). This audience awareness, van Dijck argues, is in part a result of Facebook users



having to make multiple decisions about what material to make available to which audiences. Scholars such as boyd have also demonstrated the ways in which SNS users have become increasingly aware of audience concerns, but what is most compelling to us about van Dijck's work is its analysis of the Facebook's timeline feature. That the portfolios students create bear a striking resemblance to the narrative features of Facebook that van Dijk describes is not entirely surprising. While the personal narrative as well as the more academically-focused literacy narrative have long been staples of basic writing classes, the added affordances of a digital platform allow students to achieve significantly more as they simultaneously develop rhetorical and technical skills in order to reflect on their progress as they tell their stories to a wider audience.

Although we did not ask these groups of students about connections between their iBooks and Facebook's arrangement, the similarity is striking. While students have always been likely to use a chronological structure in a portfolio cover letter, they were not likely to pin that chronology to a narrative structure and to use an over-arching metaphor as a framing device. In contrast to the print portfolios, which tend to have much more generic titles such as "My Portfolio," students' iBooks titles include "Many Roads," "Work in Progress," "The Sky Is the Limit," and "How I Went from Lost in Space to Forming a New Ground," to frame their portfolios. Other titles reflect on the students' self-discovery: "I Am Dedication," "You're Braver than You Believe," and "The Epiphanies of an Amateur Writer." These titles suggest that in the iBooks Portfolio Pilot project the students made use of the sense of audience that they developed on their SNSs and applied it with great success to the organization of their portfolios. One participant reports that of her 48 students, 32 had original titles, seven used the journey motif we will discuss below, and seven did not include titles on the cover page but had original titles on the internal pages (including the motif of the journey); only two used the "Name + Portfolio" formula.

As the iBook Portfolio Pilot continued, we realized that as students learned to operate the iBooks program they were using the tools familiar to them from SNS templates—design, graphics, video, sound—as a means of creating an academic online identity. In the same way that SNS users create a persona to present and interpret the events we decide are important enough to share with our social networks, students create an online identity to interpret and present their academic work to audiences that could extend beyond their instructors and their classmates.

That the template suggests or even forces a particular narrative struc-



ture is, surely, one of the challenges to creating an online identity that concerns Yancey. While there are many concerns that we could raise in regard to this kind of identity formation, we remain aware that other templates encourage students to produce other identities. Given the same assignment in the Blackboard environment, the students do not personalize their portfolios with a narrative, and the titles revert to “Melissa’s Portfolio” and the like. Students completing a Blackboard portfolio do not personalize their portfolios beyond choosing from one of the color schemes (the only real design option available) and do not include visuals, even on their landing pages, and even when instructed (how) to do so. These portfolios are virtually interchangeable; it would be almost impossible to identify the student by the design. As Yancey notes, then, the template *does* have an impact on the identity that the students is able to produce, but the identity that students create through a limiting application such as Blackboard is not that same as that created when faced with the challenges and opportunities available in a more comprehensive platform such as iBooks Author.

The creation of an iBook is a significant accomplishment for students. They are writing their own book and exercising substantial control of its content and appearance. They are taking what the New London Group has called the “Available Design,” or the book form, and reshaping it in accordance with their own goals. The New London Group asserts that making use of the Available Design in the act of redesigning it “is never simply a repetition of the Available Designs. . . . Any semiotic activity—any Designing—simultaneously works on and with these facets of Available Designs. Designing will more or less normatively reproduce, or more or less radically transform, given knowledges, social relations, and identities, depending upon the social conditions under which Designing occurs” (195-96). While students in our classes are not radically transforming the world, they are able to create new identities for themselves as students, an act that is potentially transformative for them.

### **Close-Reading of Two Students’ Portfolios**

In many ways, the two portfolios discussed here are representative of the kind of work all the project participants received from our students. The narrative theme of the journey, as we have noted, was a common one, and many students chose images that connected to one another, although most did not do so to the degree Mark and Tiffany did.<sup>6</sup> The students appropriated the form of the chapter book to weave the texts into a meta-narrative of their



personal journeys through composition. Their iBooks have a high degree of what Mary Hocks describes as transparency: the “ways in which online documents relate to established conventions like those of print, graphic design, film, and Web pages. The more the online document borrows from familiar conventions, the more transparent it is to the audience” (632). Mark, Tiffany and all of the other students appropriated and redesigned the book form for their own purposes (Kress). They wanted their books to look like books, and neither did anything to disrupt their readers’ expectations. At the same time, the use of carefully chosen found images to create an identity, the hybridity of text and image, the textual annotations, and the links to external sites, were familiar to Mark and Tiffany, and their readers, from SNSs. As readers of SNSs, we understand that Mark and Tiffany are the subjects of the images they have chosen, even though they are not pictured in them. This, too, is a lesson gleaned from SNSs, where the found images and videos are often carefully chosen to cultivate a public image for a perceived audience.

In fact, in his response to our question about his reasons for using these images, Mark articulates his interest in representing himself to his audience. Mark notes that he “wanted to be clear about what I wanted to show the readers of this. I wanted them to be able to know that I came a long way. Then it just hit me to kind of show it in a kind of physical way. I started with the idea of that and went from there. I’m from the Middle East so I thought it would somewhat fit my personality having a desert there.” Clearly, Mark is interested in making sure his audience understands both his identity and the value of the work he has accomplished.





1 WALK A MILE IN MY SHOES

## COVER LETTER

The English 16 experience I had this semester was unforgettable. It was basically a continuous learning story. I went from being lost in thoughts and ideas to knowing how to formulate, organize and put them on paper. I went from thinking that I knew everything I needed to write papers to realizing that I knew almost nothing. I acquired the skills to read, take notes and mark down ideas when reading, and writing for a specific purpose. It all began with the very first essay when I tried to in-



2 INTRODUCTION

## LOST

The first essay I wrote for the class was comparing two people's opinions about what the process of writing essays should include. I was also asked to compare their opinions to my own process, and give an example on how I used that process in the last essay I wrote. At that point of the semester, I thought I knew everything I needed to know about writing. I thought that I would be able to get through this class without needing anything new or learning anything that I haven't learned already. I was completely wrong. I read a lot before, but in order for someone to use the information they read in a big article or story, he/she has to mark it. I tried not marking these readings but it never worked for me. I tried to state my points and support it from the text when I knew the author agrees with me but would not find it easily. I would practically have to read the entire article again to find a couple of sentences that supported my argument. The other main thing that I learned from this essay was evaluating the reader. In this essay, my reader was professor Peele and that was an issue for me because I didn't know him well at first. I thought he would want us to pretend the audience was the whole school like

4



3 INTRODUCTION

## FINDING MYSELF

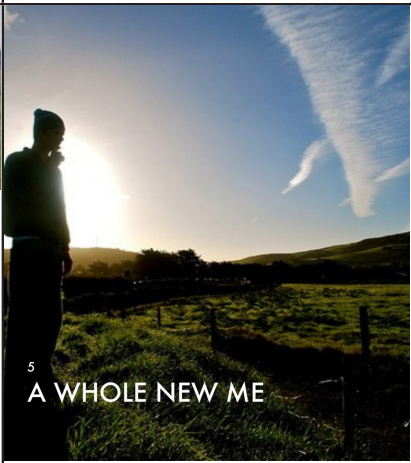
In this essay I was asked to identify the differences between all the types of community service that Keith Morton talked about. I don't approach the right targeted assignment at first but after the conference with my professor, I realized how to approach it better. The assignment involved understanding and analyzing Keith Morton's essay and giving examples about each type and also identifying which one is more effective and why. I had to analyze which of the three types were better and what they cause or affect in our modern day society. After that I was asked to examine which one would be best and if my organization met those requirements or what it actually lacks and why. From my point of view at that time, I had not started tutoring yet but from what I read about CCA (Center for Community Alternatives), I knew that it met most, if not all, the criteria explained in Keith Morton's essay and my own way of viewing it in the beginning of the semester I had a hard time getting used to setting up an MLA format document because of all the details I wasn't accustomed to but because of the essays I wrote and the number of times I used MLA, I am now very comfortable with the type and format used.



4 INTRODUCTION

## A DIFFERENT VIEW

This essay taught me or was the start of when I learned to use the school's database to research and find online articles that helped me in my third essay draft which this essay talked about. I learned to use more credible sources and search engines than just "Google" which I have been using in all my other classes. I also learned to pay attention to small grammatical and technical problems in my essay since the draft of this essay failed to reach my professor on time for my confer-



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## A WHOLE NEW ME



The book is entitled *The Narrow Opening*. On the top half of the cover, there is a photograph of what appears to be a desert with a fairly imposing rock formation. There is a hole in its center (the “narrow opening”) that appears to have been created by blowing sand. The sky behind the rock formation is an almost perfectly clear blue. On the cover of his book, Mark presents an image of something that seems impossible to achieve: the carving, into intricate shapes, of rock by sand. While Mark might be suggesting that he has accomplished this task by random, repeated acts, our reading of this image is that he intends to convey to his audience that he has achieved something difficult, perhaps something that he thought was impossible. As he notes in the first paragraph of his introduction, “I acquired the skills to read, take notes and mark down ideas when reading, and writing for a specific purpose.” We do not comment here on Mark’s fluency with these abilities, but we do note that in his cover letter he presents himself as someone who has worked very hard. Thus, Mark sets the stage for the reader to correlate the text and the images, to see the writer in both. By using a series of images to illustrate each chapter of his book, Mark both invites the reader into the text and builds an identity using tools that are germane to SNSs.

In the first chapter, the image of a pair of well worn, military boots are juxtaposed with the phrase “Walk a Mile in My Shoes.” Here, Mark invites the reader to imagine that these are the shoes that he has worn, metaphorically, through the various challenges of his composition course. Mark has made excellent use of the hybridity afforded by the digital medium. He uses the text and image to inform each other, and he uses the image to invite the reader to imagine Mark himself on a journey through the semester and to see him as the struggling author of these texts. In fact, without the image, we wonder if Mark would have used the “walk a mile” metaphor at all; as noted, certainly very few of the students submitting print or Blackboard portfolios attempted to engage their readers by establishing an identity or personal narrative in this way, as the vast majority of reflective letters in the print portfolios are eponymously titled.

Similarly, the footprints in an empty, sand-filled landscape that illustrate the next chapter, “Lost,” can appear to the reader as a metaphor for Mark as he worked his way through the course. The color scheme is consistent with the opening image: sand and deep blue sky. As Mark notes in the text, “At that point of the semester [during the first assignment sequence] I thought I knew everything I needed to know about writing. I thought that I would be able get through this class without needing anything new or learning anything that I haven’t learned already. I was completely wrong.” Mark suc-



cessfully combines text and image to help the reader visualize his struggle as a writer. Mark continues the visual metaphor throughout the book as the footprints lead us, in the final two chapters, to a more fertile landscape and a fully-realized figure—as Mark puts it, “a whole new me.”

The images also suggest a larger narrative. Knowing that Mark is a recent immigrant from Egypt, we begin to read these images on a global level. In the “Finding Myself” image that follows the footprints in the sand, a man stands with his arms outstretched. He is wearing what appears to be a combination of Western and Middle Eastern clothing—shorts, a tank top, and a long scarf that is wrapped around his head and neck and flows to below the cuff of his shorts. The image for the final chapter, entitled “A Whole New Me,” completes the visual metaphor. In this image, the figure of a man stands at the left side the frame while the sun rises behind him. His attire is not clearly visible, but he’s wearing the kind of watch-cap that’s currently associated with the urban hipster. He also appears to be wearing a backpack of the kind usually worn by hikers, which is what this individual appears to be. The “narrow opening” of the cover image suggests not just the difficulties of getting through composition, but the larger difficulties of immigration.

This level of meaning is made available, at least in part, because of the affordances of iBooks. The non-iBooks academic portfolios available to our students in this pilot project called for a narrative of *composition*, not of one’s self. SNSs, on the other hand, give us the tools to create an identity and to tell our personal stories—tools that students readily adapted to their basic writing portfolios. In his portfolio, Mark has superimposed a layer of meaning on top of the story that he created with his academic work. That is, he provides the reader with additional information about who he is—a struggling student, a recent immigrant—as well as specific information about the essays.

Another example illustrates the way iBooks allow students both to personalize their portfolios and demonstrate fairly sophisticated audience awareness skills. Like Mark, Tiffany personalizes her portfolio with an extended metaphor. She explains the illustrations she chose to introduce each chapter: “I decided to name my portfolio ‘English Blossom’,” she writes, “because of my growth. According to thefreedictionary.com blossom is a period or condition of maximum development. I feel like that describes my work perfectly because throughout the semester I’ve developed into a better reader and writer.” While Tiffany’s illustrations, like Mark’s, show her growth through the course, unlike Mark’s, they represent an attempt to connect the student’s personal story to the content of the chapters they



introduce. The reflective letter pictures a water lily in bloom—and reflected in the water. The photo accompanying the rhetorical analysis assignment pictures the subject of the analysis, in this case the Web site of Perez Hilton, with a carefully-selected photo showing Hilton sporting both a bright yellow flower on his lapel and a flowered handkerchief in his breast pocket and—it takes a good eye to notice it—standing against flowered wallpaper. The essay on social psychology and media shows a cartoon bird watering a flower, a somewhat more incongruous choice, although in keeping with her overall theme. The book's final image—following the last essay—is another cartoon, this one of children playing happily in a field full of flowers and perhaps representing Tiffany's joy (and relief) at having successfully completed both the course and the portfolio.

In addition to this controlling metaphor of growth, Tiffany chose to intersperse images through the essays themselves. For her rhetorical analysis of Perez Hilton's website, for example, she methodically illustrated each paragraph with the tab for the section of the site under discussion so that her reader's experience mirrored the experience of reading the site she was analyzing. The social psychology essay, an interdisciplinary paper based on a class lunch during which students were allowed to communicate only through social media, is illustrated with the corporate logos of the restaurant where we ate (the Applebee's across the street from campus) and the social media sites they used to communicate. While the discussion of the use of corporate logos is beyond the scope of this essay, we want to point out how Tiffany mimicked Facebook, where the advertisements in the sidebars bombard us with such images, making it likely that if she used Facebook to post or chat about the lunch, she had an ad for Applebee's in her newsfeed before we left the restaurant. In this case, too, the audience was invited to share her experience, including a picture of the food she ate, through techniques Tiffany learned at least in part from her experience with SNSs.

The work that students create here is a variation on the kind of work that Ben Lauren and Rich Rice describe when they write that the "photo essay can employ images to represent evocative associations or ideas students are having difficulty putting into words." In this case, as we saw above, Mark and Tiffany were able to articulate their intentions. They used images to create an identity and a personal narrative that, without digital affordances, they would not have had the means to express. Like Mark and Tiffany, the other students made use of these affordances to achieve their own rhetorical ends and to guide readers through their portfolios. While they did not ultimately write about this process, the text that they were creating—the



portfolio—was *itself* a meta text. They successfully appropriated the form of the book, redesigned it for their own purposes, and brought to bear skills they learned on SNSs to reach their audiences.

### **iBooks, Networked Writing, and Audience Awareness**

On a practical level, our project taught us several things. First, as discussed earlier, students successfully completed their iBooks when they were required—that is, when they were built into the fabric of the course. Second, access to the technology is key; our students, whose home access to hardware and the Internet is often unreliable, would not have been able to complete the project if we had not dedicated class time to it. Third, some students will be much more adept with the technology than we are. This is okay. In fact, having students discover new functionalities and then teach them to each other—and to us—increases the ownership students feel for their finished portfolios.

Our assessments of our students' iBooks led to several observations. Every student who completed this project chose a unique series of images to illustrate their texts. Similarly, students chose a wide variety of fonts, page layouts (full-page, two- and three-column layouts) and color schemes. Students who submitted Blackboard-based portfolios did not make these same choices; they arranged their portfolios following MLA format and provided them with generic titles such as "My Portfolio." In these portfolios, awareness of an audience beyond the instructor seemed non-existent. Of all of the affordances that iBooks and these other, locked platforms allow, the sense of audience that students demonstrate is perhaps the most dramatic. iBooks Author encourages students to play with their writing using a wide range of tools and to think about presentation to an audience in ways that text-only essays do not. Through the templated space of their iBooks portfolios, they create an online academic identity—an avatar of sorts—through which to present their work. This self-presentation aligns with the creation of identity experienced by users of SNSs. In this digital context, they are able to use the audience awareness that SNSs provide and apply it to their academic work.

The reasons that students have a heightened sense of audience are no doubt multiple and varied. Perhaps for basic writers, the opportunities to use images and videos to convey meaning enhances academic communication and makes them more interested in reaching an audience that is easier for them to imagine. Perhaps the change in audience awareness results in



part from students' knowledge that documents produced to circulate on the Web function differently than texts designed to be handed to an instructor. In their study of writing in the freshman year, Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz note that the idea "that a student might 'get something' other than a grade and that there might be a 'greater purpose in writing than completing an assignment,' represents the most significant paradigm shift of the freshman year. . . . When students begin to see writing as a transaction, an exchange in which they can 'get and give,' they begin to see a larger purpose for their writing. They have their first glimmerings of audience. . ." (139). And this is true whether or not the texts actually *do* circulate. Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri, in writing about a political video remix project, argue that the students' projects need not be public, which suggests that much of the value of the project lies in the design process itself (79). And in an essay about the difficulties associated with copyright, Steven Westbrook writes about his student's multimodal production that her "text may not change the world overnight, but it has at least more *potential* to disrupt distributions of power within this larger publication context precisely because it can be easily circulated among masses of people" (472).

The iBooks that our students create are not intended to be subversive, nor are they necessarily intended to critique the broader culture. The similarity between these projects and those described by Dubisar, Palmeri and Westbrook is that the iBooks, though they are distributed in only limited ways to their instructors, to other students, and perhaps to friends and family, still contain the potential for much wider distribution. The texts invoke the canon of delivery and enliven the idea of audience. For these students, creating and distributing a book that looks and feels like a book challenges them, and the readers of their texts, to think differently about their identities as students and as basic writers. iBooks ask students to think more carefully about delivery and design as they move students to see writing as having value beyond the grade and classroom. iBooks offer students the opportunity to see themselves as successful writers pursuing their own goals by adapting the tools they have at hand.

## Notes

1. As of 2015, the Apple operating system makes it possible for iBooks to be viewed on all Apple computers, a development that should make a project such as this one more widely accessible.



2. We are indebted to Mary Louise Pratt for her concept of the “pedagogical arts of the contact zone,” which she describes in “The Arts of the Contact Zone.” Pratt argues for heterogeneous approaches to composition practices, including “exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison” (40). Pratt makes the case for a diverse, inclusive composition practice. We hope there are echoes of these values in our approaches to ePortfolios.
3. Students are placed into our remedial sequence in one of three ways: through a combination of SAT and high school GPA scores, through a pen-and-paper placement test in which students respond to an editorial, or through an online exam, called iMOAT, in which, over the course of two days, students read several editorials/articles on a topic and write a response. Students unhappy with their SAT placement may challenge it by taking the exam. Most students are placed by SAT scores; very few opt to take the iMOAT as issues of home computer access seem to make them favor the pen-and-paper option.
4. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* study on college completion, in 2013, the six-year graduation rate for LIU Brooklyn was 24.0%; four-year rate was 8.0%.
5. J.S. Dunn, Carrie Luke, and David Nassar, comparing off-the-shelf technology with the platforms they chose to use, Google Sites and Google Docs, note that although the systems they “developed may not be as comprehensive or nearly as tailored as those built from scratch, it is arguably more customized than many of the current off-the-shelf eportfolio software packages—and with minimal front-end costs, it is much more sustainable” (69).
6. Students’ names have been changed; their work is used with permission and has been deemed by the institution as exempt from IRB regulations.

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