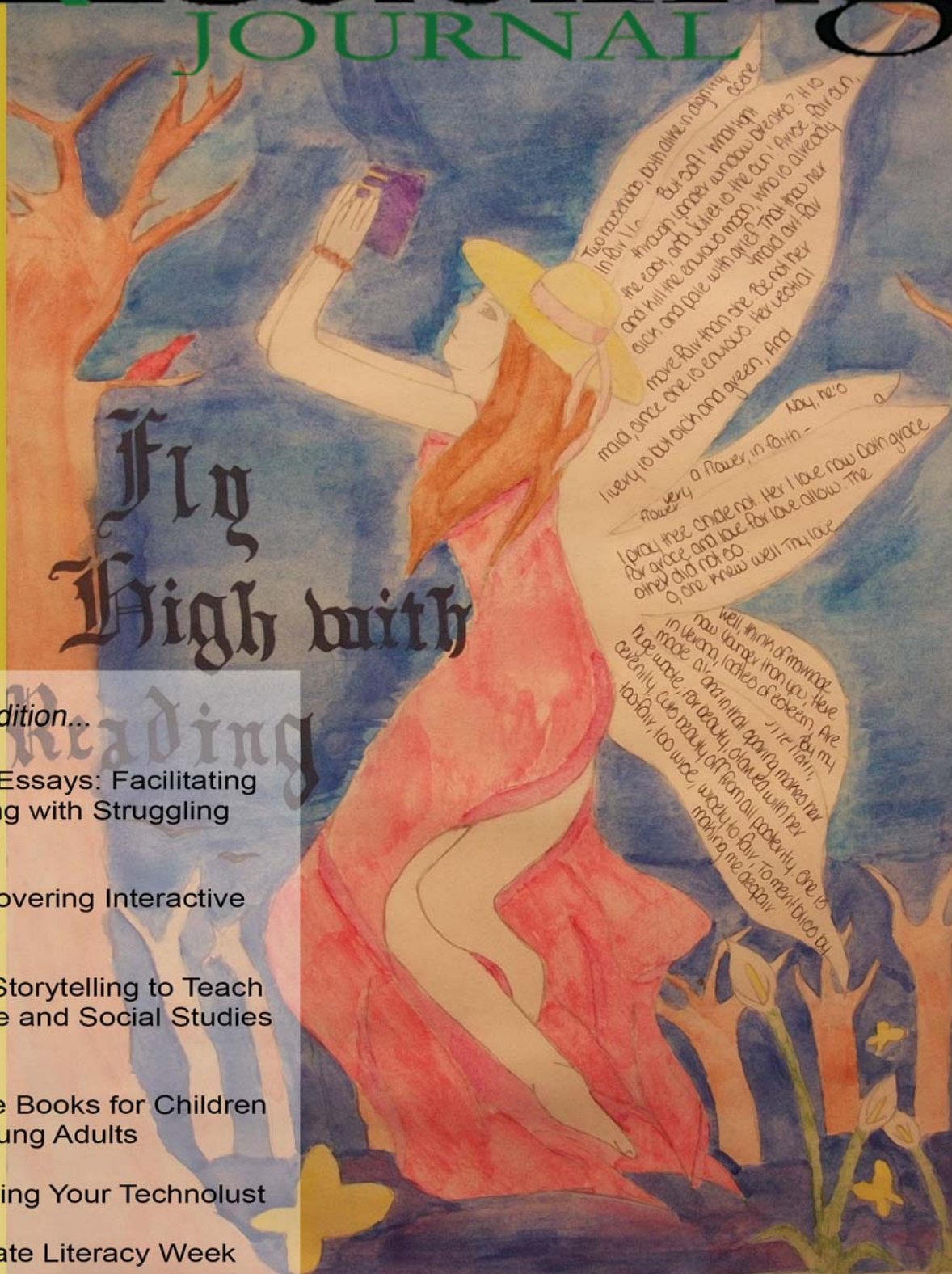


# The FLORIDA Reading JOURNAL



## Fig High with

### In this edition...

Digital Essays: Facilitating  
Planning with Struggling  
Writers

Rediscovering Interactive  
Writing

Using Storytelling to Teach  
Science and Social Studies

Notable Books for Children  
and Young Adults

Satisfying Your Technolust

Celebrate Literacy Week

# The FLORIDA Reading JOURNAL

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## Digital Essays: Facilitating Planning with Struggling Writers

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**Abstract:** This article describes the process for using the digital essay as a motivational tool to help struggling writers during the planning process

Students' ability to write well is essential to their success in school and can have a significant impact on their post-school outcomes (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Boscolo, 2008; Graham, 2006). Good writing, however, can be difficult. It involves not only a basic understanding of mechanics and conventions such as spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure, but also an awareness of and engagement in all stages of the writing process (i.e., planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) (Cunningham & Allington, 2006; Deatline-Buchanan & Jitendra, 2006; Graham & Harris, 1988). Researchers have found that writers who are most proficient spend the majority of their time in the early stages of the writing process, planning and drafting their work, and spend less time on mechanics and conventions (MacArthur, 2009; Nauman, 2007; Shin Ju, Monroe, & Troia, 2007).

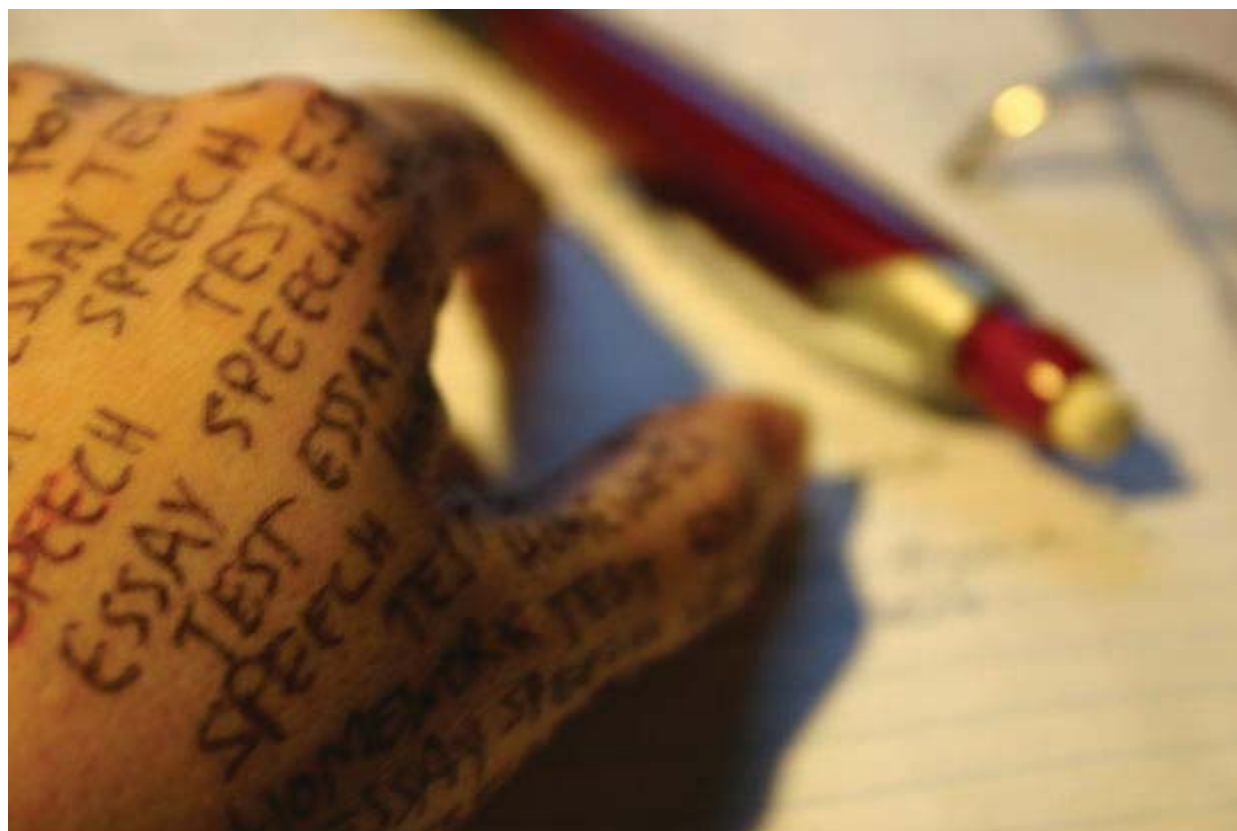
While the later stages of the writing process are also important to producing good finished products, research has shown that the most effective use of time is spent planning (Hillocks, 1986). In fact, good writers spend the majority of their time, over 80%, planning (Murray, 2003). It is during planning that writers develop and set goals, engage in research, and create an outline (De La Paz,

1997; Murray, 2003). Planning allows writers to consider why they are writing, what they are going to write about, and who they are writing for (i.e., purpose, content, and audience). Effective planning can increase the "length, quality and organizational structure" of an essay (Graham & Harris, 2003, p. 324).

### Struggling writers

Despite the importance of planning to the production of good writing, researchers have found that struggling writers spend little time planning for writing (MacArthur, 2009). This occurs, in part, because not enough instructional time is devoted to teaching students how to plan for their writing tasks. The majority of instruction time, as much as 35 of the average 45 minute writing instructional session, is spent working on mechanics and grammar, with less than 10 minutes spent providing instructional strategies for planning and drafting (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Moats, Foorman, & Taylor, 2006). This overemphasis on grammar and mechanics encourages students to speed through the planning stage, so that they can devote more time to editing their ill-planned work (McAlister, Nelson, & Bahr, 1999; Saddler & Graham, 2007). While writers need to know the conventions of grammar and usage, devoting so much instructional time to





these skills has led many students to underestimate the importance of carefully considering audience and purpose, and planning their writing based on these considerations (Tompkins, 2002).

For writers who struggle, explicit instruction is needed in the planning process (Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009). When Troia, Graham, & Harris (1999) implemented an intervention that involved training fifth grade students struggling with writing to engage in extensive planning, they found an increase in the amount of relevant information used to support the primary points (i.e., elaboration) in students' writing. Similarly Saddler, Moran, Graham, & Harris (2004) found a planning intervention resulted in increased elaboration, organization, and generalization to other kinds of writing in second grade struggling writers.

As these interventions indicate, explicit planning instruction can significantly improve the work of struggling writers. Effective

planning instruction should focus on motivating students to consider audience and purpose, generate and organize ideas, and include modeling, guided, and independent practice (Kos & Maslowski, 2001). This article describes the process for using the digital essay as a motivational tool to help struggling writers during the planning process. The ultimate goal is for the struggling writer to transfer skills acquired during the process of planning for the creation of a digital essay to the creation of traditional print essays.

### **Writing and technology**

Soon after easy to use word processing programs were developed in the 1980s, educators recognized their potential not only as writing aids, but also as potential tools for teaching writing (Milone, 1984). As computer-aided writing technology has developed and been refined, some teachers have tried to embrace computer-assisted instruction (CAI) as a boon to their teaching. However, while

computers have clearly changed the way we write, the teaching of writing has remained largely unchanged. Early on, advocates for fully embracing new instruction techniques called for teachers to use computer technology to teach new ways of planning, drafting, and revising that were impossible with pen and paper (Strickland, 1987). More than a decade later, advocates for branching out beyond pen and paper based techniques were still pointing out that teachers were, for the most part, resisting significant changes in the way composition is taught (Selfe, 1999). Even contemporary supporters of CAI continue to assert that computers are not being used to their fullest potential in teaching writing (Bacci, 2008).

While teachers have primarily focused on using computer technology to teach traditional literacy skills, twenty-first century students are increasingly required to not just be literate in the traditional sense of being able to read thoughtfully and write well, but *multiliterate*. Using computer technology effectively and to its fullest potential requires that students recognize and comprehend visual cues like icons and navigation bars, and requires that they are able to communicate using not just words, but still images, moving images, and audio (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009). Just as computer technology has opened up new possibilities for communication to students, it offers teachers new challenges for how to teach students to use these technologies effectively, and how to translate these skills, which students are often eager to learn, back to foundational writing skills, with which many students struggle.

Every teacher recognizes the importance of students being literate in the traditional sense; despite the need for students to have new literacies beyond the classroom, traditional writing skills are still the ones that are most commonly assessed, and are still vital to student achievement in the classroom and beyond. However, teachers must also

recognize that it is important to prepare students for the new literacy demands of digital media (International Reading Association, 2001; Leu, Mallette, Karchmer, & Kara-Soteriou, 2005). One way to achieve both aims is have students work on both traditional literacy and new digital literacy skills at the same time. Having students create persuasive digital essays allows teachers to facilitate the learning of digital literacy skills as well as traditional literacy skills through planning for the creation of traditional persuasive essays.

A persuasive digital essay, like its print counterpart, requires students to brainstorm for ideas, develop a claim, consider their purpose as they gather evidence and organize their ideas, and make convincing appeals to persuade an audience. These skills are all transferrable to the creation of a print persuasive essay. Having students create a persuasive digital essay with a program such as *Photostory 3*, allows students to use still images and audio narration to make their arguments. Allowing students to create a multimedia project such as this is a strong motivator for students (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009; Burn & Reed, 1999). It can also be especially motivating to struggling writers who are excited about the opportunity to express their ideas in new ways (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009; Reid, Parker, and Burn, 2002). This motivation is amplified when the students know that they will be able to share their digital essays with a larger audience than they typically can for a traditional essay (Cohen & Riel, 1989). Using such programs, a student can decide on a main idea for a writing piece, create an outline to support the main idea, choose and import images to accompany the outline, narrate the images using the computer's microphone, and choose music to accompany the final product. Once completed, these digital essays can be shared as short two to five minute video clips with a viewing audience of teachers and peers, and even be posted on the internet to be viewed by a wider audience. This prospect makes struggling

writers eager to learn the process by which these finished products can be produced.

### **Writing and technology: A classroom study on planning for persuasive writing**

We will describe how technology, *Photostory 3*, can be used to motivate struggling writers to focus more time on the planning process of writing. The primary benefit of using technology to produce writing is that writing pieces can be easily made public, and so students can envision their audience and know that their audience will experience their work (Banaszewski, 2002; Burn & Reed, 1999). This helps to establish a purpose for writing, which is especially important for struggling writers. Based on the benefits cited in the research regarding the importance of effective planning, we decided to incorporate *Photostory 3* as a method for increasing the amount of time students spent planning for writing, and to help students understand that planning does not end once writing begins.

Downloading *Photostory 3* involves going to the program's website and clicking the download link. *Photostory 3* was used instead of alternative technology applications, because we were familiar with the program and we had multiple examples of finished products readily available as good models for student viewing. Alternative technology applications (e.g., *Moviemaker* and *Powerpoint*) with similar features may also be used. The examples provided are based on a unit on persuasive writing. When we evaluated the previous descriptive and narrative writing samples of the students involved in the project, we encountered organizational (i.e., how well ideas flow and connect), elaboration (i.e., adding details to main ideas), spelling, and grammar issues. We will contextualize our description by providing examples of how two students (Guy and Lara-both names are pseudonyms) from a classroom of 13 fifth graders struggling with writing navigated the process of using *Photostory 3* to create persuasive digital essays.

The students were chosen because they provided a good representative sample of the writing characteristics exhibited in the classroom as a whole. The whole process lasted approximately two weeks.

### **Guy**

Guy was an eleven year old African American male student who lived with his mother and younger brother. Since the beginning of the year he had frequent behavioral outbursts that coincided with teacher requests to perform non-preferred tasks (e.g., reading aloud, writing on demand, completing math worksheets). Guy's teacher often spoke of his quickness to shut down and a general unwillingness to share his feelings. Although Guy had difficulty with organization and elaboration in his writing he was still one of the better writers in the classroom. This was especially evident when he wrote about topics that were of high interest. Guy, like many students in the classroom had previously exhibited increased positive behaviors and motivation when using technology in the classroom. In fact, he was one of the first students to fully understand how to use the *Photostory* application and was excited to begin the assignment. Guy, like a few others of his classmates, decided to focus his persuasive digital essay on the topic of recycling. He expressed that he chose the topic because of all the trash he had seen around his neighborhood. He hoped he could make a digital essay to convince other kids from his neighborhood about the importance of recycling.

Guy began storyboarding his digital essay using a layout provided by his classroom teacher. The layout allowed students to map their essay narration and draw a sample of pictures they would like to locate during their online image searches. A list of student friendly online image websites is provided in Table 1. Although the sites provided in the table are student friendly, be sure to monitor students as they perform their images searches.

One strategy Guy's classroom teacher provided all students in the class during whole group modeling was using visualization. He made use of this strategy and would often draw a picture of his points before devising a description. Guy knew he wanted to start his digital essay with a statement and an image that would grab the viewers' attention. After having visualized and drawn a picture of plastic bags floating in the local river, Guy was able to create a very convincing hook, "Stop poisoning the earth with plastic." From this opening hook, Guy went on to discuss the negative impact of not recycling on animals. He stated, "Some animals mistake plastic for food. Many of them die from that mistake." Guy went on to make an important connection between plastic and oil by asking, "Do you know that the plastic you use is not what it seems? It's actually oil. Do you want to use oil to carry your groceries? I wouldn't." Guy went on to suggest to the viewers, "Don't throw away a plastic bag in the trash can...use a recycle bin. If you recycle you can get paid. It's probably not much but it's something...right?" Guy completed his digital essay by making a powerful statement about what our country should do with plastic bags. He wrote, "If China, Israel, Canada, Singapore, and Uganda can ban plastic bags so can we."

Guy's digital product was one of the best in the class. His narration could be likened to spoken word poetry and was arguably better than the narration the adults had provided when we created our own sample models for the students. It was evident that he did considerable research to support his points. Some of the adults who viewed his final product admitted to not knowing that plastic bags had been banned in so many countries. We have since begun using Guy's digital essays as a model example for incorporating technology and literacy in classrooms in our college courses.

**Table 1:** Image Websites for Students

Image Websites for Students
<a href="http://www.askkids.com/">http://www.askkids.com/</a>
<a href="http://www.classroomclipart.com">http://www.classroomclipart.com</a>
<a href="http://www.kidsclick.org/psearch.html">http://www.kidsclick.org/psearch.html</a>
<a href="http://www.kidzui.com/">http://www.kidzui.com/</a>
<a href="http://www.picsearch.com/">http://www.picsearch.com/</a>
<a href="http://www.tekmom.com/search/#Images">http://www.tekmom.com/search/#Images</a>

### Lara

Lara was a twelve year old Caucasian American female student who lived with her mother. She was a very well behaved and compliant student. She had one of the most significant difficulties in the area of writing in her class. Her problems with writing included devising topics, organizing ideas, adding details, revising, and editing her compositions. Lara's teacher hoped that the real world aspects (e.g., presenting to a real audience and pairing text with pictures and sound) of *Photostory* would positively impact her ability to develop and organize topic ideas. Lara experienced some trouble learning some of the components of the *Photostory* application and so her classroom teacher had another student, who had learned the application quickly, assist Lara with some additional practice in such areas as saving and retrieving images and recording narration. The topic that Lara chose, showing kindness to animals, was also chosen by many of her classmates. Lara expressed that this topic was very important to her because she had seen many stray animals in her neighborhood that had been mistreated. She hoped her digital essay would convince other students about why cruelty to animals is wrong.

Lara began her storyboard as other students in her class did, by devising a hook to grab her audience. Her teacher expressed that Lara had a bit of difficulty devising the hook and so they spent additional time during mini lessons working collaboratively to brainstorm, share, and listen to ideas shared by other classmates. Lara eventually created the hook, "Do you



know that thousands of animals are being abused right outside your door?" She accompanied her narration with an image of an animal standing outside the front door of a house with a lonely expression on its face. In an effort to convince her audience of the severity of the problem, she stated a statistic. She wrote, "Over 30% of people abuse or abandon animals. This leaves animals wandering around the street." Lara went on to provide an example to personalize the problem. She stated, "On the street behind my house there are a lot of cats wandering around looking for food and shelter." She continued with an effective appeal to the viewer's fears by stating, "If you abuse animals you may be behind bars for breaking the law." This narration was accompanied by a menacing image of a young person behind bars. Lara completed her digital essay by defining what it means to be kind to animals. She wrote, "It is important to feed and provide shelter for your pet." She provided viewers with alternatives if they are unable to take proper care of their pet by stating, "If you have a pet you don't want don't abuse or beat it up...give it to a shelter."

Lara produced a good digital product that included many convincing points. Lara's teacher remarked that she seemed more motivated to continue developing research ideas to support her topic for the digital essay than she had been for previous traditional print essays. It is possible that the concrete experience of presenting the digital essay to a real audience had a significant impact on Lara's increased understanding about the concepts of audience and purpose for writing and being motivated to successfully complete the writing task in general.

### **Sharing and Applying *Photostory 3***

We found that students were motivated to take the time needed for extensive planning in the creation of the digital essays. There were only four computers in the classroom and so completing the digital essays required some

creativity on our part. We put a structure in place that allowed students to rotate through mini-lessons, independent writing, and digital essays. However, students also made requests to work on their digital essay during their structured free time such as *Fun Fridays* and semi-structured free time such as completing assigned tasks early. This motivation to work on the assignment was true for the majority of the students in the class. Students were also willing to use their free time to listen to each others' narrations and provide feedback. The student to student feedback ranged from "I couldn't understand that. Maybe you should slow down a little" to "Do you have any research to back that up?"

Once all the students completed their digital essays we set a showcase date. We invited members of the school faculty that had worked closely with many of the students. The students were very excited to share their creations not only with their peers but with their teachers as well. During the days leading up to the showcase students would frequently remind their other teachers about the showcase and ask about their availability during that time. In attendance were the special education resource teacher, the speech language pathologist, the behavior resource teacher, the classroom teacher, and classroom students. Students' reactions to the showcase varied from gregarious to bashful. Some students like Guy wanted to make frequent interjections to illustrate his process or how he helped others as different images appeared on the screen. He would ask, "Do you know how hard it was to find that picture?" Or he would say, "I helped you with that." Other students, like Laura, appeared quiet while the teachers in the viewing audience made positive comments. They said things like, "This is impressive Lara," or "I didn't know that was true."

Once we completed the viewings of the digital essays we began to focus on making explicit connections between the planning involved with creating digital essays and creating



traditional print essays. Arguably, the most significant aspect of infusing digital essays as a planning tool was the concrete and interactive experiences it fostered for students. We found that the process of creating a product that students knew would be viewed by a variety of audience members created a real reason for students to pay close attention to traditional essay elements. For example, students like Guy who would normally resist the idea of taking the time to engage in brainstorming were motivated to devise numerous attention grabbers before settling on just one. The importance of thorough research also became clear for students as they wanted to be able to create the most convincing argument for their viewing audience. Creating the digital essay also allowed students to see the importance of organization in that the way and order in which information was presented had a significant impact on the power and effectiveness of their arguments. Overall, we observed that the digital essays really laid the foundations on which students were able to build their traditional essays.

Students like Guy, who often shut down during writing time, were engaged and motivated to improve their essays during the paper/pencil portion of the project. Students often expressed relief in knowing that after creating their digital essays they were “over half way through their traditional essays,” because all they had to do was just “add some points here and there.” Even students like Lara, who struggled with writing, seemed to gain feelings of self-efficacy and increased confidence in their ability to create a good finished product. Students also seemed less resistant to elaborate on specific points during the traditional essays based on peer and teacher feedback provided as a result of the creation of the digital essays.

## **Conclusion**

Having students learn how to create and publish digital essays helped motivate them to engage in extensive planning for their work,

and it also helped them understand that the issues addressed during planning are also present during drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. We observed students applying the planning strategies they learned while creating their digital essays to planning for their traditional essays. In addition, we observed students more engaged in drafting and revising their traditional essays, and more aware of the prewriting concepts they learned to focus on while planning and creating their digital essays (e.g., considering audience, purpose, organization, and the effectiveness of how they present their ideas). The interactive and multimedia aspects of creating and publishing digital essays provided students with (a) an increased sense of purpose and excitement for persuading an audience about something that was personally meaningful; (b) increased collaboration and feedback among peers; (c) an opportunity for an authentic showcase of their products; (d) and real reasons for making changes and additions to their pieces.

Our experiences with digital essays suggest that having students use computer technology to create something they could not create with just pen and paper can empower them with both digital and traditional literacy skills associated with listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This is important for all students, but can be particularly motivating for struggling writers who have had difficulty learning how to effectively communicate in print. As previously stated, the process necessary to plan for the creation of digital essays is similar to the planning process for the creation of traditional print essays. The digital essay requires that extended time be spent considering purpose, content, and audience before writing. In addition, substantial time is spent generating and organizing ideas before writing and before words can be combined with images and sounds. Struggling writers often gloss over the planning process when the end result is a traditional essay; however, the promise of a digital essay emerging from this process can be a strong motivator for students

to spend extensive time planning. Once struggling writers have learned to use and have seen the benefits of effective planning through the creation of digital essays, teachers can make explicit connections to planning traditional print essays.

For teachers who would like to motivate students in planning using multimedia authoring software, choose an application that contains three basic features (i.e., narration, images, and music). Teachers also need to decide how they would like to use the authoring software. Teachers should work with the program and try to create model examples for students. It can be used to motivate struggling students for a variety of purposes such as descriptive essays and narrative stories.

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