



Digital Literacy as a Tool for Self-Authoring: Teaching Reluctant Student Writers Through “Redesign”

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Abstract: Academic writing is a challenging task for students because of the complex stylistic and generic conventions associated with it. This is particularly problematic in the context of the diversity of backgrounds our students bring to higher education. In this article we report on our experiences and findings as teachers-researchers with a course that we designed and taught over a period of three academic years to Mexican university students who were considered as ‘failing writers’ given their inability to write a research paper or ‘thesis’ required for graduation. The thesis underlying our teaching was that these students needed to experience what it feels like to enact a personal voice through writing. This could be achieved through a range of unconventional modes and genre formats before they could try on the culturally distant genre of expository-argumentative academic writing. We found that our participants discovered themselves as expressive and creative beings as we engaged them in activities designed according to the principles of self-authoring digital practices (Hull & Katz, 2006) through the redesign of available designs (New London Group, 1996).

Keywords: Digital literacies, redesign, academic literacy practices, diversity in higher education, self-authoring literacy, equality

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Introduction

Understandably, lecturers want their students to engage with the disciplinary epistemologies, practices and knowledge that they themselves love and from this perspective the analogy of apprentice or novice is appealing. But for most students a university degree does not imply an academic career and students do not necessarily see themselves as becoming 'full members' of the academic disciplinary community in the same way that an apprentice builder might.

Fiona English (2011: 41)

New media not only introduce new ways for us to express ourselves, but also new forms of self-awareness—new ways to reflect on who we are and how we relate to others.

Michael Wesch (2007: 19)

The difficulties students face when writing academically in their native or a foreign language, have been widely acknowledged (Dudley-Evans, 2002; Swales, 1990), and pedagogic interventions have been designed to improve students' grammatical, stylistic, and generic practices expected by particular academic communities. Yet despite decades of research and pedagogy seeking to develop students' writing capacities, the perception is that many still fail at acquiring the skills and adopting the identities necessary to partake in the academic practices (Ivanic, 1998; Hyland, 2002). If good writing as such is hard to achieve, good academic writing is often a daunting task for novice writers. As Fiona English notes, most students pursuing a university degree do not necessarily aim to become 'full members' of academic disciplinary communities built around conventionalized forms and norms of written communication. As we recurrently note it in our teaching practice with non-mainstream students, these highly regulated forms of expression often prevent students from acquiring a sense of voice, ownership, and authenticity, moving them to reject altogether the task of writing. This is the reason why in our teaching with reluctant student writers we have sought to explore the assignment of new forms of self-awareness and self-expression that, as Wesch argues, new media is opening up.

Today's digital technologies (DT) are often seen as obstacles for students' engagement with extended, argumentative academic writing, given their capacity to enable short text messaging and 'copy and paste' practices. Yet, DT also afford novel and engaging expressive means and genres, often little explored by university teachers. They allow, for example, textual practices such as blogs, wikis, forums, videos, podcasts, digital storytelling and many others that involve multimodal forms of expression by combining image, text, music, voice, and video. Additionally, the user-centered design of Web 2.0 tools allows users to become content creators not limited by geographical boundaries.

While the benefits of employing DT in the classroom include the acquisition of technology skills (Lowenthal, 2009) and bear the potential of enhancing creativity, reflection and critical thinking, for us the key goal of using digital and multimodal tools in our teaching practice has been to develop students' sense of themselves as authors of their own words, meanings, and selves. We see, thus, digitally mediated literacies as self-authoring tools (Hull & Katz, 2006) that may potentially enable students to speak or

write with a personal voice that scaffold their transition towards a 'discoursal self' (Ivanic, 1998), i.e. the emergence of a new sense of self through the use of discursive and expressive means in a public space.

Furthermore, as we write elsewhere, "Literate people are not those who de/code texts, but those who use texts to decode the world and speak for themselves" (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010, p. 9; Schmidt, 2011). We believe that, at least for most students in Mexican institutions, living the experience of speaking for oneself and about oneself is a crucial step to becoming academically literate, insofar as academic writing is, to a large extent, a practice of public self-display (Scollon & Scollon, 1981), a performance that cannot be accomplished if one, as an individual or as a member of a certain cultural group, has little or no experience in what it means and feels like to express one's views and take a stance in the public sphere of literacy mediated conversations. This is precisely the case of most of our reluctant student writers who have read, written and memorized a number of words uttered by others to fulfill school requirements and pass exams, but have hardly ever experienced a sense of authenticity, voice and authorship of their own. In this article we share part of such experiences and discuss their theoretical significance in the context of today's transition towards new multimodal, digital literacy practices and the increasing need to address the diversity of sociocultural backgrounds of our students.

Genres and affordances

Instead of viewing students as deficient in the application of specific generic conventions and hence in need of remediation we embrace a genre pedagogy that opens up alternative communicative possibilities for students (English, 2011; Martin & Rose, 2005). Essential to this view is the notion of *affordances* (Kress, 2010). In general terms, an affordance is a quality of an object that allows the user to perform a certain action, it thus creates 'action possibilities' (Norman, 1988). A button, for instance, affords pushing, a pencil invites drawing and a cord suggests pulling. Just as material objects afford specific actions, symbolic objects, such as modes and genres, suggest specific intellectual, communicative, or expressive possibilities. The concept thus foregrounds the relation between the environment participants find themselves in, the purposes they pursue, the resources available to them, and the choices they make in order to create meaning.

As the Table 1 shows, DT widens the range of semiotic resources that allow creativity and appropriation of semiotic resources in a way that contrasts sharply with the rather rigid form of academic writing required from students.

Table 1

Differences between print-based academic text design and digital text design

	Print-based text design	Multimodal text design
Senses involved	Visual	Visual, aural, "tactile" (virtual)
Meaning carriers	Written words, graphic aids (e.g. headings, paragraphs, charts), layout, formatting, font, punctuation.	Voiced and written words, music, sounds, imagery ³ (pictures, photos, drawings, vignettes, icons, motifs, frames, graphics, etc.), motion (video, animation), color, layers, effects* (image, sound, video), transitions, perspective, framings etc.
Pathway	Mostly linear: left-right, top-down)	Non-linear, not necessarily sequential
Discourse values	Extended, diegetic (expository, argumentative), heavily verbal, language-centered, explicit and linear discourse	Briefer; mimetic (descriptive, theatrical) and/or narrative; verbal- multimodal balanced; evocative, non-linear discourse
Voice	"told" through verbal voice: linguistic and written signs and genre conventions	"told and shown" through verbal and visual voice: multi-semiotic resources and less conventionalized and more hybrid genres
Creativity	Constrained by APA and other academic conventions	Expanded through varied means, modes, and genres

Thesis, questions, and objectives

Most public universities in Mexico face low graduation rates. Between 40% and 70% of all undergraduate students, for instance, never finish their degree (SEP, 2004) due to their failure at writing their final thesis, a key graduation requirement in the Mexican higher education.

We argue that for these kinds of students learning to express themselves in unconventional genre formats precedes their ability and willingness to try on culturally distant genres, particularly the expository-argumentative academic writing. In fact, it struck us in this and other courses we have taught in Mexico, how often students self-introduce themselves as individuals of "few words." We have discussed elsewhere the colonial roots of these silent and silenced voices in Mexican society, a post-colonial

³ *Imagery* refers to types of images; *Effects* are changes within an image, audio or video file made possible through image, sound, or video editing software.

context where writing about oneself using multimodal means is sometimes felt by students as potentially face-threatening self-display. Over time, though, students tend to perform more creatively and competently in their productions than within the genre of expository-argumentative prose and found this experience enriching, rewarding and transferable to other contexts and situations. Against this background, we seek to answer the key research question: How can designing digital texts around personal topics benefit failing student writers to express themselves? More specifically, this research has two objectives:

1. To develop writing experiences involving the simultaneous design of texts and selves through digital means of expression.
2. To explore the kind of affordances that personal writing and multimodal texts make available to university students in need of developing writing identities.

Method

Site and participants

The work reported in this article was carried out at one of the campuses of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), located in the Western part of Mexico City where impoverished working class *colonias* are mixed with modern middle class suburbs. Unlike other areas of the country Acatlan is relatively quiet and safe. We work here with students who finished their coursework at the undergraduate level, but did fail to write a thesis. A *thesis* is a required project for obtaining a bachelor's degree in most Mexican universities. They are generally done in the fourth year near graduation, and after completion of the coursework, which is supposed to ensure an adequate knowledge and aptitude for the task of writing a thesis. Unlike a doctoral dissertation or master's thesis, they are not as long, and do not require a novel contribution to knowledge, but they are still seen as a daunting task for many students, requiring good expository and/or argumentative writing skills, months of research and writing work, the use of scholarly citations, and the supervision of a professor adviser. The final step requires them to present their thesis at an oral examination before a committee.

As a matter of fact, the pervasive low graduation rate in Mexican higher education institutions (between 20% and 40% according to research and official sources; Díaz de Cossio, 1998; SEP 2004) is, to a large extent, caused by students not complying with this key graduation requirement. Significantly, the UNAM, the leading higher education institution in Mexico, has responded to this widespread problem by introducing new pathways for students to earn their university degree: They have the option to graduate through "professional work", "global test", "social service", "high achievement", "seminar", "teaching assistantship", "admission in a master's program", and many others (UNAM, 2012).

The students we work with have already worked for some years before they returned to the University with the desire to finally finish their undergraduate degree in areas such as Pedagogy, Computer Sciences, Applied Mathematics, and Sociology among others. Most of them come from a working class background with little economic resources. Nevertheless, they are willing to pay a relatively costly fee (around 2000 USD) for a

special program (a *diplomado*) in the hope of being able to graduate without having to write a research thesis.

Diplomados require students to cover 240 hours of coursework in specialized areas over a period of approximately eight months. The module we report on is part of a diplomado program called *Virtual Learning Environments and Objects* (VLEO). It comprises six modules (40 hours/week) and is offered in a blended modality. One of these modules entitled *Expression and Digital Design* (EXDD) was designed and taught by one of us. Its formal goal is to introduce students to the “possibilities that expressive and multimodal digital texts and objects offer for the construction of meaningful autobiographic and personal topics” (course syllabus). Course activities include reading, writing, lecturing, and class discussions around issues of personal history and voice, representations of self and other, narrative and memoir, digital identity and the expressive power of multimodality, and agency and authorship. Input and scaffolding in relation to the mastery of technological tools is provided. The main objective is to encourage students to express personal topics and create meanings through varied genres with the aid of digital tools.

On writing ‘reluctance’

Over the past four decades, a wave of studies on cross-cultural differences in communicative, affective, and cultural patterns have shown recurrent evidence that just as in matters of food, clothing, or religion, significant differences exist between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ communities in cultural practices of self, public display, and discourse patterns (Philips, 1972; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Heath, 1983; Valdes, 1996; Ogbu, 1999; Hornberger, 2006; Liu, 2014; Chang, 2010). Many Mexican students, such as those we reported on in this study, seem to embody cultural values that do not align smoothly with those assumed and sanctioned as ‘academic discourse’ by the mainstream educational institutions. Thus when we speak of the ‘reluctance’ of our students towards academic writing, rather than assuming a discursive lack or deficit we notice among them the presence of strong cultural dispositions (Bourdieu, 1991) towards knowledge, discourse, and self that differ from those expected by the educational system. These dispositions underlie, in turn, a complex set of attitudes such as a preference for narrative over expository discourse; a general inclination to knowledge-saying rather than knowledge-transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1992); a reluctance to public displays of self and knowledge; a fancy for humor and chaos rather than gravity and order (which is how academic writing is often perceived); a tendency to distrust academia and academics as role models for anything truly important in life (such as family, happiness, humility, money, etc.); a discomfort with the one and a thousand minutiae of academic writing manners (e.g. the details of correct citation and referencing); a refusal to look ‘ridiculously smart’ (what African-Americans call ‘acting White’), and above all, an aversion and often rejection for anything that sounds or looks pedantic and highbrow.

In short, we teach students who as a general rule exhibit a strong proclivity to remain safely silent in the classroom. Yet when forced to ‘communicate’ using the ‘detached’ and impersonal forms of essayistic literacy (Olson, 1977) they tend to exhibit

a disregard for the mannerisms and 'etiquette' of a written communication style that is experienced more as an obstacle than as a true means of communication.

As long term residents and members of the Mexican society ourselves, we acknowledge the presence of discourse values and practices among higher education students (including postgraduate students) that seem to conflict with the forms and values assumed as 'natural' by faculty members educated in North American or European universities. We believe, however, that the 'silence' that many students seem to exhibit when required to write academically, expresses rather a distrust towards modern cultural and educational institutions deeply rooted in a long history of political colonialism and domination that goes back to the pre-Columbian era, and remains almost intact to the 21st century authoritarian political system that pervades in Mexico (De Mente, 1996; Cancino, 2012; Hernandez-Zamora, 2010). Perhaps this is similar in other parts of the ex-colonial world, but we can attest that not speaking up one's thoughts *through academic forms of discourse*, is common among Mexican students in higher education institutions, including postgraduate students. It seems that whenever they are required to write academically, they are being enforced to publicly display not what they are but what they are not. Thus, while we acknowledge the limitations of the pedagogical experience reported in this article, we think that getting our students out of silence and making them feel excited about expressing themselves through written and multimodal practices might be seen as a modest contribution to the educational challenge of helping students make the transition from silence towards a 'discoursal self' (Ivanic, 1998), i.e. the emergence of a new sense of self through the use of digitally meditated discursive and expressive means in a public space.

Teaching design

In previous teaching experiences we noticed how difficult it can be for students to compose a text from the ground up, to understand the often abstract instructions provided by the teacher, and to rely solely on their own linguistic means of expression. We therefore began to experiment with tasks that required students to re-design previously selected model texts or genres in order to channel their personal meanings. For the EXDD course, we found the framework developed by The New London Group (henceforth NLG) (1996) in the context of their "pedagogy of multiliteracies" helpful. The authors conceptualize any linguistic or multimodal activity as interrelated with questions of design, i.e. specific ways of combining and recombining semiotic resources:

We propose to treat any semiotic activity, including using language to produce or consume texts, as a matter of Design involving three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned. Together these three elements emphasize the fact that meaning-making is an active and dynamic process, and not something governed by static rules. (p. 74)

According to the NLG, Available Designs can be described as conventionalized combinations of semiotic resources, such as genres and discourses at the macro level and their lexico-grammatical, visual, sound and other semiotic realizations at the micro-level. The notion of Design draws attention to the actual work performed on and with these Available Designs in specific instances of meaning making processes. The

Design can hence reproduce or transform the Available Design, and thus lead to Redesign, the creative transformation and hybridization of conventions (p. 77).

Guiding our pedagogy was the idea that exposure to available designs in digital modes might afford expressive and agentive possibilities unavailable in conventional academic genre practices. Underlying this idea is Bakhtin's (1981, p. 294) dialogic conception of language appropriation: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, when he appropriates the word and adapts it to his own intention." Thus, most of the writing in the EXDD course departed from inspirational 'designs' that we had found potentially useful.

Table 3 *EXDD assignments*

Assignment	Genre	Available design	Digital tools
Rhymed self-presentation	Rhymed dialogue	<i>The Never Ending Story</i> , Book by Michael Ende	Word processor Inline text (Moodle)
A-Z Guide	Personal dictionary	<i>D is for Dhal</i> , Illustrated Book by Roald Dahl	Word or PowerPoint Adobe PDF Interactive online document reader and publishing website: www.issuu.com
8 lives	Self-presentation in third person	<i>Eight Lives: Between Risk and Hope</i> , Photo exhibit by Diego Goldberg www.zonezero.com	Word processor
Children like me	Visual paraphrase	<i>Children just like me</i> , Illustrated Book by Anabel & Barnabas Kindersley	Image editor (GIMP)
Digital Narrative	Digital storytelling	<i>I Photograph to Remember</i> , Digital story by Pedro Meyer www.zonezero.com <i>MomNotmom</i> , Digital story by Thenmozhi Soundararajan http://www.storycenter.org/storage/publications/cookbook.pdf	Audio editor (Audacity) Video editor (WMM and/or Photo Story) Video sharing website: www.youtube.com
Personal website	Website	Free website templates Online website editing tools	Free website designs by Weebly (www.weebly.com) and Wix (www.wix.com)

The central tenets that guided the design of the EXDD module were hence: 1) Individuals can learn to fashion identities through writing and other representational means if they are engaged with unthreatening and meaningful tools, texts and practices

(Hull & Katz, 2006). 2) Before adopting a voice of an academic writer, academically failing students need to experience and develop a more general identity as an author, that is, as an individual willing and being able to communicate her own ideas through semiotic means. Rather than challenging basic writers to compose and craft texts from scratch, they should be exposed to available designs that enable them to channel their own meanings and intentions through creative and effective re-designs.

Table 3 shows the list of assignments we created for the EXDD class. The first column (Assignment) lists the assignment name, as it was provided to the students; the second column (Genre) is a tentative classification of the genre of the text involved – both the base text and the text created by the students; the third column (Available design) lists the original or ‘base text’ used as a model for the students to redesign and create a new one; and the fourth column (Digital tools) lists the kind of digital tools required to complete each assignment.

Through these assignments we wanted to foster students’ ability to use digital tools as means for self-representation as well as encourage them to try out different ways of constructing their own identities and voice. Students had to make their own decisions about the linguistic and digital means of expression they wished to employ in order to convey personal content such as, for instance, memories, meaningful objects, and everyday life events and practices. The assignments were intentionally sequenced according to the complexity of the software tools involved: word processor, image/audio/video and website editor. Students were required to edit and then publish their work by using free online services such as ISSUU, YouTube, and Weebly.

Results

In the following, we describe each assignment, examples of the students’ work, and some analytical comments.

Rhymed self-introduction

One of the opening tasks was the so-called “rhymed self-introduction” (*presentación en verso*), a simple but effective ice-breaker inspired by a passage of *The Never Ending Story*, by Michael Ende (1982). It is based on an episode in which the hero, Atreyu, arrives at the Southern Oracle, a lonely forest of columns, where he listens to Uyulala, a mysterious and invisible “voice of silence.” Atreyu tries to dialogue with Uyulala but she replies:

UYULALA:

If questions you would ask of me,
You must speak in poetry,
For rhymeless talk that strikes my ear
I cannot hear, I cannot hear

ATREYU:

Oh, Uyulala, tell me where you're hid
I cannot see you and so wish I did

We rephrased the Spanish version so that the students could adopt the role of a character that is required to say who he/she is in rhymed form. We present here only the English translation:

Rephrased version (assignment)

Student reply (Grisel)

If you want to know who you are
In verse you can say it
We want to know about you
Who you are and what you are doing
here

I am college student in my heart
And am proud of being a student
To achieve a degree is my illusion
And I'm not going to give up

This diplomado is my option
And I am learning with emotion
To finish is my joy
And get started with my master's

Eight Lives

Eight Lives is another writing activity involving the redesign of an available text. This time students were asked to write a self-introduction by paraphrasing one of the short essays of a photo exhibit by the Argentinian photographer Diego Goldberg (www.zonezero.com).



Figure 1. Eight Lives website

We selected *Eight Lives: Between Risk and Hope* (Figure 1) because of its compelling portrayal (both pictorial and textual) of eight individuals from Middle East and North African countries who experience suffering, grave illnesses, or extreme deprivation. For each person, the artist displays a set of photos accompanied by a short but vivid essay about the person portrayed. This text uses descriptive language to depict everyday life scenes,

feelings and desires of each individual. The EXDD students were invited to adapt the essay

about Silvia, a girl from Uganda, to write about themselves:

Original Eight Lives text:

Silvia is a rarity in the Kamwokya village in Kampala, Uganda's capital. She is 15 and has no children, and even rarer, has a partner who accepts to take care of himself.

We found that this released students of the burden of the syntactic and thematic organization of the text; they leveraged their voice and populated the redesigned text such as in the following first lines of some of their texts:

"Jessica is a cosmopolitan woman who inhabits the XXI century in Mexico. She is 27 and has no children, and even rarer, has a boyfriend who makes her happy..."

Students arranged the entries in either Word or PowerPoint and added images (Figure 4).

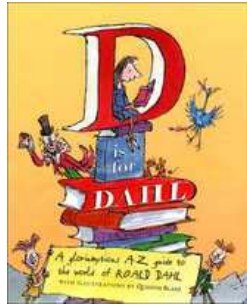


Figure 3. D is for Dahl, original book



Figure 4. Redesigned "A-Z Guide", published in ISSUU

Children just like me

In this assignment students were asked to redesign a page of the book *Children just like me* (Kindersley & Kindersley, 1995) (Figure 5) about the dreams, beliefs, hopes, fears and everyday life of children around the world. The author positioned a photo of one child in the centre of each page and assembled significant objects and places and texts around it. Again, students were asked to use the original design and personalize the content through pictures of themselves, their favorite toy, pet, house, and other significant items (Figure 6) using image-editing software, such as GIMP or Photoshop.

Figure 5. *Children just like me*, original (paper) book



by



Figure 6. “Children just like me”, redesigned (digital) text

The assignment afforded the creation of new connotations for images shot at varied times and places as they were relocated into a context. By cropping and resizing the images, assembling them with texts and juxtaposing them with other images and graphic elements, the students became aware of the meaning potential inherent in multimodal representations. The assignment allowed students to re-present themselves and their ordinary life within a new symbolic context. Just as Fernanda (see her *Eight Lives* assignment above) students expressed a sense of joy and confidence as creator of their own representations of self. See, for example, Teresa’s final comments about the course:

The experience of telling my own stories about trivial topics in order to represent myself, allowed me to discover my skills of expression and language use unknown so far to me; and it helped me to acquire more confidence and motivation in the creation of other resources. (Teresa)

This self-representation and exposure to others initially created a certain degree of insecurity that could only be overcome by building a safe environment where contributions of all participants were equally valued and respected. Grisel describes this transition from being shy to feeling safe and confident in the following way:

At the beginning I was scared because sharing myself with others made me feel vulnerable. I wondered how risky it would be to expose so much about me. But now I see that nothing happens, that we all are respectful and curious, and we all liked seeing the work of everybody else. All the assignments in this class, and the experience of sharing them with everybody, helped to deepen our fellowship. We now see something new in each of us, and as you express your ideas, you share more than what it is. (Grisel)

Through activities such as Children like me, the students gained confidence not only in relation to authoring and sharing texts about personal matters but also in relation to the technical tools employed:

It was hard for me the completion of some assignments, since the tools were completely new for me. But it is very enriching to learn by using them and by making mistakes. I take with me a rather meaningful learning in the creation of these materials. (Carmen)

Digital storytelling

Perhaps the most technically complex and personally challenging project in the EXDD course was the creation of a digital story. Students had to decide what they wanted to express, they had to write a script, to record their own voice while reading the text aloud, and to use this voiceover to assemble a video with pictures, background music, transitions and effects of their choice. Technically, the task involved the use of video editing software (Windows Movie Maker or PhotoStory). This orchestration of multiple means of expression resulted, in turn, in more emotionally laden texts.

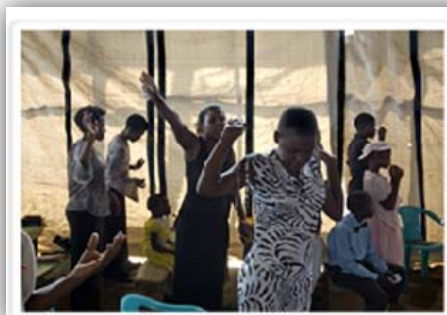
Stories are memorable ways to help people make meaning out of experience, which is key not just to learning but also to find a voice and develop agentive selves, as Hull and Katz (2006) argue. According to these authors, self-authoring digital practices are hence particularly important:

... for people living in disenfranchised or disadvantaged communities where they are often segregated from the material and social resources of our society, how critical it is to have access to tools and technology, and to believe in their own present capabilities and imagined futures. (p. 73)

As language and literacy educators we wonder why despite its growing popularity, digital storytelling has not received more attention as an educational tool (Lambert, 2010; Lowenthal, 2009, p. 297). We present the example of Isidoro, one of the quieter students in the class (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Isidoro's "Children like me" assignment



Kamwokya, Uganda

Silvia is a rarity in the Kamwokya village in Kampala, Uganda's capital. She is 15 and has no children, and even more rare, has a partner that accepts to take care of himself.

But in Silvia's life, there is no room for love. She sails in dangerous waters and has managed to survive by calculating risks and benefits. Silvia goes to church every Sunday to pray for protection of pregnancy and AIDS.

Figure 8. Eight Lives original text at http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/goldberg_diego

Up to this point in the class we were somewhat unaware of the sound of his voice. We were therefore amazed at experiencing how a voice could project an otherwise unknown persona. Isidoro changed from an apparently silent and shy individual, to an expressive, compassionate, reflexive son, father, husband, teacher, and citizen. He did this by adding the 'gift of his voice' (Lambert, 2010), as well as background music and pictures from his personal albums to the composition he wrote for the *Eight Lives* assignment (Figure 9). His final text seemed revealing and expressive to us.

Consider the next fragment of Isidoro's redesigned text, written in response to the Eight Lives assignment, which he used as a script for his digital story (translated from Spanish):

Isidoro is teacher in a middle school in Naucalpan, State of Mexico. He is 40, has two beautiful children and an adorable wife. He is not a soccer fan. More rare, he prefers to stay home than hang out with friends. In Isidoro's life there is no room for boredom, for he has many duties, like planning his classes, doing homework for his diplomado, playing with his little children, reading stories to them, helping his little princess with her homework, talking with his wife, and hanging out with his family. His life has been full of sadness but also of joy....

By adding his voice, something different became apparent: the text stopped being a



Figure 9. Isidoro's digital story uploaded in YouTube

“task,” instead we were compelled to listen to a human being speaking to us with both intelligence and sensibility (Figure 10). We discovered the different personas within the 'same' individual in every new assignment/genre with most students. Even in cases where individuals used a previously written composition as a script for their digital story, we “heard” and learned something new about each of them. The transformation from a written text to an audio file added a new layer of meaning and expression.

By watching these digital stories, we did not just learn more *about* the participants in the group but actually '*met*'

them as entire persons, as human beings, as authors of their own voices.

Discussion

Public education is meant to balance out differences between individuals caused by socio-economic background and turn effort and achievement into the sole means for success. We fully subscribe to these objectives and are aware that students from different backgrounds have differential access to culturally valued literacy practices and are hence more or less prepared to succeed in academic writing. Instead of viewing our students as “deficient,” we wanted to strengthen our students' sense of authorship and

to enhance their meaning making capacities. We argued that students can hardly engage in academic writing if they have not first experienced a discourse identity of themselves as authors of their own voices. To this end we went beyond the classical way of teaching academic writing and beyond the traditional written mode and included digital genres, which offer a range of multimodal affordances. A key pedagogical premise guiding the design of our course was the idea that exposure to available designs in digital modes might encourage expressive and agentive possibilities unavailable in conventional academic genre practices.

The designs we made available to our students showed to have great potential to engage and motivate our students and to enable them to link their experiences outside of the institution with those inside of it. Participants entered into dialogue with their biographical self, they reflected upon and expressed their values and knowledge and they became aware of the constraints and affordance of past and alternative (digital) literacy experiences.

The genres they employed affected what they created, what they paid attention to, how they articulated their ideas, and how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis others. In their redesign students were able to actually experiment with and feel in control over their own means of expression, as they stated in evaluative comments about the course as a whole that they wrote in the last week of classes:

The software, the digital tools, and the literary structures that I learned will help me for a lifetime, for I often agonized trying to invent how to express things. What we learned allowed me to realize that following a little structure is enough to unleash your creativity. (Alejandra)

By doing the assignments I was able to polish, little by little, my own style, which mirrors a little (or a lot) of my personality. (Isidoro)

Without doubt this course was especially valuable and significant for me. Apart from being a learning space, it was above all a space for personal introspection that allowed me to discover that our own identity and personal history is important for the development of our own voice, it gave me the opportunity to reflect upon the relevance that all this has for our the creation of expression and meaning. (Maria Teresa)

Learning to write is deeply influenced by the political and historical context of an educational system and the policies and practices that take place therein (Bazerman et al., 2012). Our teaching context – a public university in a post-colonial country at an overpopulated urban and largely poor environment – is in many respects particular and so is probably the need of our students to live the experience of speaking for themselves in a public space before they engage in highly regulated and formalized academic conversations. Nevertheless, we believe that our fundamental arguments can be generalized to other contexts. In most general terms, academic writing always incorporates interaction between writer and reader and this, in turn, requires the visibility of the author. As Guo (2012, p. 2) points out, academic prose is, contrary to the traditional view, not devoid of human agency. However, as educators we are still challenged to help students to discover, experience, and appropriate this authorial potential of the academic text.

Thus, designing pedagogic interventions that offer a range of alternatives to the rather rigid design of academic genres is particularly important in relation to the current

internationalization of universities. Students from different socio-cultural and national backgrounds attend higher education institutions in other than their home countries, many of them in Anglo-Saxon contexts. If they want to pursue an academic degree they are commonly advised to polish their academic English as it has become the lingua franca of academia. This raises a number of concerns vis-à-vis linguistic and cultural standards and norms, of inclusion and exclusion, of dominance and marginalization (Canagarajah, 2002). We feel that in order to help our students to participate in academic written or oral conversations, we have to take their literacy background, personal histories and identities into account; we have to be open to a diversity of academic literacy practices; and we need to take into account the changing nature of literacy practices in and outside of educational institutions (Andrews & Smith, 2011). Multimodal and digital genres, combined with the guiding pedagogic principles of design and redesign (NLG, 1996), seem particularly well suited to serve these goals.

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