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### More Meditations on Word Building

Although my students ordinarily write a literacy narrative at the beginning of the semester, High Point University's English 1103 curriculum includes a creative project following the midterm reflection. So instead of writing a model literacy narrative for my students in the first weeks of the course—as I have for so many years—I found myself instead beginning that piece of writing in October. Teaching a first-year writing course with a different assignment sequence led me to ask myself how my students and I may benefit from crafting literacy narratives in between more conventional assignments. In retrospect, I realize that those personal stories not only offered a welcome departure from the more traditional academic essays typical of a freshman composition course, they also provided us a chance to reflect on our earlier learning experiences as a prelude to beginning the most rigorous assignment of the course: the research project. Together, the literacy narrative, the research project, and the ongoing weekly Wordplay Days increased my understanding of how those seemingly disparate endeavors enable the discoveries essential to our learning.

One of those discoveries occurred as I began writing my model literacy narrative for my students. Because I have written so many literacy narratives, beginning another one always tests my ability to recollect an early learning experience that I haven't already recounted in an essay. As I began to freewrite with my students, I was reminded of the importance of trusting the process. Even though I did not have a subject when I first put pen to paper, as I continued to

scribble in my journal, I found myself returning in my mind to my first-grade classroom. There I saw my six-year-old self writing my first sentences. And there my literacy narrative began. As I noted in the narrative, itself, “the memory of writing one of my first sentences resurface[d] in my mind because it marked a turning point. Before that sentence-writing exercise, I had recorded letters on a page, but I had not truly written. When I looked at the words on the chalkboard and said to myself, “The pig wore a wig,” I had formed an idea. I composed it in my mind and wrote it on the page.”

I experienced a similar discovery in the process of working on my model research project. Though I had uncovered useful source material on the aspects of my course that would serve as my subject, tying it all together proved to be an arduous task. Rereading my sources and placing myself in conversation with them deepened my understanding of my classroom practices and also helped me develop some ideas for redesigning activities. Yet the organization that my essay needed still eluded me.

As I continued to browse articles devoted to screen time, I happened upon Gavin Francis' essay “Scrolling” in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*. In the opening paragraph of the essay, Francis, a physician and author, recounts his visit to Walden, an excursion that showed him that our daily distractions had even encroached on the site of Henry David Thoreau's cabin, the place where he wrote *Walden*, the place that had come to be considered the quintessential retreat. That observation of Francis' and his reference to William Powers' concept of Walden Zones helped my essay take shape. What linked the pieces of my research project were the ways in which the classroom practices I examined in my research served as opportunities for Walden zones. Once I realized that, I was able to connect the components of my essay.

One of those components, the study of Scrabble play in the college classroom, introduced me to the ways in which professors at MidAmerican Nazarene University had incorporated tabletop games into their undergraduate courses. Along with replacing individual play with teams to offer students exercises in collaboration, the MNU professors included debriefing sessions, which I am contemplating as an addition to my classes next semester. Each Monday may find my students returning to their Friday groups to review images of their game boards and discuss their play. Were they faced with the challenge of a rack full of vowels or consonants (or nearly all vowels or consonants)? Were they able to spell multiple words in one turn with parallel play? If so, how many words did they play? Did the teammates encounter any disagreements regarding how to advance? Those are some of the questions that I may ask my students to consider as a way of re-examining their collaboration and creative problem solving.

Now as my students and I near the end of the semester, each of us can look back on a body of work that exceeds what we believed we could accomplish. As I wrote in my research project, "Even as I wrote these words that you are reading, I struggled to maintain my focus. I found myself returning to pen and paper to develop my ideas, ones that were too easily cut short when I hit the delete key." That was true of this reflection as well, another piece of writing that has reminded me to trust the process and that has shown me how much I have learned along the way.

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“On its Face, Who Could Disagree with the Transformation?”:

Revisiting Richtel's Report on the Blog-Term Paper Question

In *The New York Times* article “Blogs vs. Term Papers,” Matt Richtel reports on the debate in higher education on how best to teach writing in the digital age. While some professors have followed the lead of City University of New York's Cathy N. Davidson, replacing the traditional term paper with shorter, more frequent blog assignments, their detractors—including Douglas B. Reeves, columnist for the *American School Board Journal* and William H. Fitzhugh, editor of *The Concord Review*—argue that blog writing lacks the academic rigor that fosters critical thinking. For Andrea Lunsford, professor of writing at Stanford University, pitting blogs against term papers creates a false opposition. Rather than replacing term papers with blog posts, Lunsford requires students to produce multi-modal assignments: term papers that evolve into blogs, websites, and video presentations. Although Richtel's article appears to present an objective account of the disagreements among experts, a close examination of the diction and structure of “Blogs vs. Term Papers” reveals a preference for the innovations advocated by Davidson and Lunsford.

The opening paragraph of Richtel's article focuses on the academic paper as a primary cause of “angst, profanity, and caffeine consumption” among high school and college students. In stark contrast to the images of the term paper-induced misery in his lead, Richtel writes in the second paragraph that students may be “rejoicing” because Cathy Davidson—a professor at Duke when Richtel interviewed her—favors replacing the term paper with the blog. Richtel refers to Davidson as a “champion” for students and outlines her use of a course blog as a practice that has become commonplace in a variety of academic disciplines. Richtel reports that

blogs provide students with a “feeling of relevancy” and “instant feedback,” then poses the question: “[W]hy punish with a paper when a blog is, relatively, fun?”

From that question Richtel turns to the argument of defenders of the traditional academic paper, namely that the term paper teaches essential components of writing and thinking that may be absent from blog posts. Yet after letting the advocates of old-school writing have their say, Richtel undercuts their claim with this one-sentence paragraph: “Their *reductio ad absurdum*: why not just bypass the blog, too, and move on to 140 characters about Shermn’s Mrch?” To assert that defenders of traditional academic writing carry their opponents’ argument to an absurd conclusion presents those advocates of old-school writing as purveyors of the same flawed logic that their own traditional rhetoric supposedly teaches students to avoid.

Notably, the one-sentence paragraph, unlike paragraphs with multiple sentences, places heavy emphasis on a single idea. It says to readers, this is important. By introducing an apparent contradiction in the argument of the advocates of old-school writing, Richtel subverts their claim; and by presenting that incongruity as a one-sentence paragraph, he highlights the issue.

Richtel’s *reductio ad absurdum* paragraph is one of only two one-sentence paragraphs in his article. The other consists entirely of Professor Davidson’s own words. Speaking of the mechanistic quality of the term paper, she says: “As a writer, it offends me deeply.” In addition to devoting that one-sentence paragraph to Davidson’s negative feelings about term papers, Richtel returns to those feelings of hers at the end of his article and lets Davidson have the last word, literally.

In the final paragraphs of the article, Richtel recounts a tutoring session Davidson conducted with a community college student. Though she frowned on his assignment’s rigid guidelines—including prescribed sentence length—she told the student to follow the rules,

knowing that teaching him what she deemed the best practice might have led the student to fail. Reflecting on that moment, Davidson said, “I hated teaching him bad writing,” and with those words of hers, Richtel’s article ends.

Along with giving Davidson the last word, Richtel devotes far more of his article to the new literacies she and Lunsford foster in their students. Arguably, the innovative nature of the work could account for the considerable space that Richtel devotes to it. After all, what readers are familiar with—in this case the traditional term paper—isn’t news. But the preponderance of word choices that place old literacies in a negative light combined with a structure that diminishes the merits of old-school writing reveals Richtel’s implicit preference for Davidson’s and Lunsford’s innovations.

Readers revisiting Richtel’s article now, nearly ten years after he wrote it, may wonder how he would respond to the question he poses about the shift from page to screen: “On its Face, Who Could Disagree with the Transformation?” Richtel wrote “Blogs vs. Term Papers” in 2012, the year deemed the year of the MOOCs (massive open online courses). Once touted as the key to revolutionizing higher education, their success has been hampered by the same issues linked to the learning losses experienced during the pandemic. For the many students who have had little or no face-to-face instruction—writing or otherwise—in recent memory, more technology may not seem like an answer, much less an innovation.

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## Tiles, Pens, and Laptops: Midterm Reflections on Word Building

Although I have read Matt Richtel's article "Blogs vs. Term Papers" many times, this semester marked the first time I had studied it as an exercise in analysis. Ordinarily, I include Richtel's article on the syllabus as a prologue to my students' own blogging. The article served that purpose in August as well. But as I found myself teaching a different composition curriculum that features an analysis as the first major paper assignment, Richtel's article served a dual purpose: It not only oriented my students to the role that blogs would play in the class, it also provided them with the opportunity to study the way a writer—in this case, Matt Richtel—presents the ideas of the experts he interviews. By reading Richtel's article, the students learned about changes in writing practices in college classrooms; by *rereading* Richtel, they began to see how his writing takes shape. The same was true for me.

The process of crafting a study of "Blogs vs. Term Papers" prompted me to meditate on the similarities between analysis and Scrabble, another feature of the course. The more I examined Richtel's words, the more details I noticed. Similarly, the more closely I study the words on a Scrabble board and the tiles on a rack, the more opportunities for word building become apparent to me. This semester, the processes of writing an analysis of "Blogs vs. Term Papers" and playing Scrabble have deepened my understanding of how those two activities cultivate the focus that leads to the discoveries intrinsic to learning.

One of those moments of discovery occurred for me as I was rereading the paragraph in Richtel's article where he addresses an argument put forth by experts who frown on replacing the term paper with the blog. Richtel reports their claim that if teachers want to reduce term papers to blog posts, why not bypass blogs altogether and ask nothing more of their students than tweets? In my previous readings of the paragraph, I was drawn primarily to the clever mimicry at

the end. There Richtel omits letters from the words “Sherman’s March,” spelling it as “Shermn’s Mrch” to imitate the word-shortening technique characteristic of the Twitter platform.

As I studied the paragraph more closely, I saw beyond the intentional misspellings at the conclusion. Subsequently, what preceded the imitation of Twitterese became far more revealing. I noticed that the paragraph consisted of only one sentence—one of only two one-sentence paragraphs in the article—and that Richtel’s presentation of the claim demonstrates a flaw in the experts’ logic: “Their *reductio ad absurdum*: why not just bypass the blog, too, and move on to 140 characters about Shermn’s Mrch?” Realizing that Richtel presented one of their assertions as a logical fallacy, led me to this point:

To assert that defenders of traditional academic writing carry their opponents’ argument to an absurd conclusion presents those advocates of old-school writing as purveyors of the same flawed logic that their own traditional rhetoric supposedly teaches students to avoid.

Additionally, I considered the effect of choosing to present the fallacy as a one-sentence paragraph, noting that “[b]y introducing an apparent contradiction in the argument of the advocates of old-school writing, Richtel subverts their claim; and by presenting that incongruity as a one-sentence paragraph, he highlights the issue.”

Reflecting on the effect of the one-sentence paragraph, with its emphasis on a single idea, led me to reexamine the other one-sentence paragraph in the article. That paragraph, a sentence spoken by Professor Cathy Davidson of the City University of New York, underscores the prominence of her words and ideas in Richtel’s article, an observation of mine that led me to the thesis, that “[a]lthough Richtel’s article appears to present an objective account of the

disagreements among experts, a close examination of the diction and structure of ‘Blogs vs. Term Papers’ reveals a preference for the innovations advocated by Davidson and Lundsford.”

Rereading Richtel’s article through a writer’s lens showed me details I had scarcely noticed before, ones that now in plain view lead me to ask repeatedly, *How could I have missed that?* It’s a question I have also found myself asking when a word emerges from a seemingly hopeless combination of Scrabble tiles. Sometimes my students chide themselves for what they didn’t see on the board or the rack, but those realizations are almost always part of the composing process, whether we’re building words with tiles, or pens, or laptops. The closer we look, the more we discover, which is learning in its purest form.

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### A First Sentence

In first grade, we turned from tracing letters to forming each one on our own, then moved onto words, followed by sentences. For our first sentences, the teacher handed us paper as thin as newsprint, and showed us how to fold it twice and unfold it, so the page had four sections.

At the bottom of each, we wrote a sentence with words listed on the chalkboard. Above our sentences, we drew what we had just written with words.

One of my sentences was, "The pig wore a wig." I don't remember the other three, but the delight of forming that sentence has remained with me.

Although many moments of my childhood are lost to me, the memory of writing one of my first sentences resurfaces in my mind because it marks a turning point. Before that sentence-writing exercise, I had recorded letters on a page, but I had not truly written. When I looked at the words on the chalkboard and said to myself, "The pig wore a wig," I had formed an idea. I composed it in my mind and wrote it on the page.

I cannot return to the pure joy of that moment whenever I sit down to write, but I try remind myself often that all writing is creative. We always begin with a blank page or screen and create.

Left to Our Own Devices:

One Teacher's Meditations on Walden Zones for the Digital Age

In his recent essay “Scrolling,” physician and writer Gavin Francis recounts a visit to the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, where Henry David Thoreau built his cabin and wrote *Walden*. Although Francis anticipated that the area—now a tourist site—would be busy, what he didn't expect “was the forest of arms holding smartphones, taking selfies, engaging in video calls.” Francis opens his essay with that anecdote about his visit to Thoreau's woods to emphasize the pervasiveness of digital devices in our lives. Not even at a place synonymous with the retreat from daily distractions can we turn away from our phones. Francis observes one of Walden's visitors, a student perched on a rock, “arms outstretched, angling his phone while shouting out to his retreating companions: ‘I don't think you guys realize how much this place means to me, I mean *privately*.’”

Disentangling from our distractions is particularly problematic for those of us who teach, whose role in our students' lives involves cultivating the undivided attention essential to learning. Seeking a balance between screen time and time away from it is an ongoing process, one that has taken on new importance in the last year and a half, since the onset of COVID-19. Even as the pandemic has required us to spend more hours in front of our screens, we have witnessed the critical need to turn away from them.

That ability to turn away from the screen has substantial benefits for us when we write. In their textbook, *Writing Analytically*, David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen detail the problems that present themselves when we begin the process with our fingers on the keyboard:

Perhaps the most common problem with writing on a computer is that this practice can lock you into a draft or a particular idea too soon. Words that come up on a screen look

more like finished text than handwritten words in a notebook, and so, the problem of trying to draft and edit at the same time is more likely to arise, as is the likelihood that you will close off fruitful options too soon by prematurely hitting the delete button. And then there is what we might call the low-hanging fruit problem: the temptation to keep interrupting ourselves to chase links to other people's thinking (and any number of funny pet pictures) online. (125)

Rosenwasser and Stephen, professors emeriti at Muhlenberg College, note that “[w]riters tend to be more than a little divided” regarding writing on computers versus writing on paper, and they acknowledge that they “have had students who manage to capture their best ideas by jotting them down on their cell phones” (124). Still, they recommend that “at earlier stages in the writing process, and also, perhaps, in trying to work through a difficult revision, taking pen to paper might be the better tactic” (125).

Though many teachers have moved to all-digital assignments, I still require my students to draft longhand and move to the keyboard during the revision process. My initial reason for continuing that practice was the benefits it offers us as writers, including the ones cited by Rosenwasser and Stephen. Now I realize that the benefits extend beyond writing. Putting pen to paper means less time in front of the screen. That said, drafting longhand doesn't eliminate digital distractions for writers; it simply delays them. But the deferral alone is a plus. Even as I wrote these words that you are reading, I struggled to maintain my focus. I found myself returning to pen and paper to develop my ideas, ones that were too easily cut short when I hit the delete key.

Along with drafting handwritten assignments, my students play Scrabble once a week. Initially those weekly games served primarily as companions to their writing, exercises in word

building and analysis on a smaller scale. But like writing longhand itself, Scrabble presented another opportunity to turn away from our screens.

In the process of writing this paper, I found minimal research on Scrabble. Notably, the one article that focused on Scrabble in the college classroom mentioned that “[t]abletop games appeared to receive less attention from game researchers than video games, particularly within the postsecondary context” (289). The author of that study, Mark Hayse, co-director of the Center for Games and Learning at MidAmerican Nazarene University, drew his findings from the reports of three of his colleagues who incorporated tabletop games into their classes in Christian leadership, theology, and history. The professors’ focused their attention on the possible connections between gameplay and twenty-first century “learning and innovation skills,” also known as the “4Cs”: critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication, and collaboration (290).

The MNU professors’ primary research question was, “Does tabletop gameplay require the practice of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills?” (290). Their secondary question was, “What initial links might be drawn between tabletop gameplay, 21<sup>st</sup> century skill practice, and undergraduate learning?” They found that two of the four Cs, communication and collaboration, figured prominently, and the students themselves identified collaboration as the primary component of their gameplay. All three professors reported “that tabletop gameplay helped students move from classroom passivity to classroom ‘engagement’” (298). In my own classroom, I have observed the same movement from passive learning to active learning when my students play Scrabble. Sometimes they are so absorbed in their games, they are surprised to hear me announce that it’s time for their five-minute break. I also shared the MNU professors’ observation that “[e]ven though tabletop gameplay technically was coursework . . . the nontraditional nature of it seemed

to render it as play more than work” (298). Even though some students don’t like the particulars of the game—such as the rule that prohibits proper nouns, acronyms, and hyphenated words—most of the students enjoy the time collaborating with their classmates on an activity that doesn’t seem like a compulsory task.

Describing the process of gameplay, one student in the MNU study said, “There were those intense suspense moments, but there was also this ‘Oh yeah, we got this’ when we were strategizing [together]” (299). Those intense moments of suspense occur in my classes during Scrabble games when a team challenges a word and waits for me to find it in the dictionary or deem it unplayable (because it isn’t there). And there are frequent we-got-this moments when a team suddenly sees a possibility that wasn’t apparent to them before; for example: a square between two vowels where they can form two, two-letter words by playing one of seven consonants on their rack. Determining how to move forward with of only consonants or only vowels—or nearly all consonants and vowels—serve as some of Scrabble’s best opportunities for creative problem solving.

The findings of the MNU professors are markedly similar to my own classroom observations. And although adding Scrabble to the English 1103 curriculum has not been a subject of research for me, the process of writing this paper has prompted my interest in building on the study of MNU’s Professor Mark Hayse, perhaps with a project that explores the links between the problem-solving aspects of Scrabble and the writing process.

As I continue to reflect on writing longhand and playing Scrabble and how they figure in my classes, I am grateful that those practices—ones that I chose for skill development—have taken on greater importance as endeavors that lead us away from our screens.

The challenge of turning away from the digital devices that consume more and more of our lives isn't simply a good habit to aspire to—a mere item on a list of New Year's resolutions—instead it's a critical need. Recent revelations regarding Facebook's own internal research underscore the platform's harmful effects, ones to which young people are particularly vulnerable. One of Facebook's research reports found that “social comparison is worse on Instagram” and that the app's Explore page, “which serves users photos and videos curated by an algorithm, can send users deep into content that can be harmful” (ctd. in Horwitz et al.).

Riana Elyse Anderson, an assistant professor of health behavior and health education at the University of Michigan, observes that “we're watching college students really get impacted by the comparison that they're seeing in their classmates online, in social media. They're using comparison and they're feeling particularly anxious about it for themselves” (qtd. In Yang).

While Anderson notes that she's heartened by Gen Z students' willingness to seek mental health resources, “[i]t's another thing, though, when . . . professors like myself are now saying, what do we do? How do we contend with teaching, with meeting, with doing the things we have to do for school” (qtd. In Yang). Many of us who teach college students find ourselves asking the same questions in the face of both our own anecdotal evidence and the reports of mental health crises on college campuses.

Less than a month after *The Wall Street Journal* reported the findings of Facebook's internal research, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill canceled classes after student leaders demanded a mental wellness day following the suicides of two students—and the hospitalization of another student after a suicide attempt. A 2021 study conducted by the American College Health Association “found that 48 percent of college students reported

moderate or severe psychological distress, 53 percent reported being lonely, and one in four had considered suicide” (ctd. in Yang).

Facebook's internal research includes an Instagram research manager's report of teenagers “wanting to spend less time on Instagram . . . but lack[ing] the self-control to do so” (ctd. In Horwitz et al.). I observe that same lack of self-control in some of my students. And to help them overcome it, I follow a variation on a piece of advice from journalist and technologist William Powers. In his book *Hamlet's Blackberry*, he recommends that “[e]very home could have at least one Walden Zone, a room where no screens of any kind are allowed” (191). When my students put words on paper and form words on a Scrabble gameboard, they are in the Walden Zone that I have created in the classroom, a place where we become temporarily free of the screens that occupy so many moments of our lives. In his conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau remarks on “how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route” (990). The one that leads us to our screens again and again cannot be abandoned, nor should it be, but the Walden zones we can strive to maintain offer a much-needed detour.

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