The Use of Digital Poetry to Inform Preservice Teacher Education and In-Service Teacher Professional Development During COVID-19

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Digital poetry has been an important and innovative genre in many disciplines. This paper describes two separate tools (*Emerge* and *Thread*) that were used to support teacher professional development during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results suggest that within one month, over 120 poems at each of two separate schools were created, showing both a willingness of the teachers to engage in this form of professional development and a desire of the students to share their writing. The paper includes an invitation to freely collaborate in both the use of and research on digital poetry for teacher education.

**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) fundamentally changed multiple aspects of daily life including how we teach and learn. Even teachers who had experience integrating technology into their instruction found
themselves somewhat unscripted for the events of early 2020. Our work attempted to support teachers who were teaching writing, specifically poetry.

In order to best support teachers of writing, we founded our professional development on the perspective that writing is “a way of being in the world, as an act of living” (Yagelski, 2012, p. 190). From this lens, writing and writing instruction are transformative acts as writers locate themselves in their worlds. The focus is on writing “with the text” places the emphasis on the writing experience rather than the writing product (Macaluso, 2013, p. 438). This orientation was appropriate for understanding how teachers and students were using writing to make sense of their experiences during COVID-19. Additionally, this theoretical framework positioned us to explore teachers’ and students’ experiences using digital tools for composition, as we were interested in how technology shapes the writing experience.

Digital poetry is one genre for composing using digital tools. Strehovec (2003) suggests that digital poetry is its own genre, taking many forms including but not limited to “kinetic and animated poetry, ergodic and visual digital poetry pieces, digital sound poetry, interactive poetry (with collaborative authorship), code poetry, poetry generators as well as digital textscapes and installations with features of poetry” (p. 1).

Researchers who have investigated digital poetry in classrooms have found that when composing digital poetry, students can express identities, share experiences, and create personally meaningful writing (Curwood & Cowell, 2011). Additionally, research has documented how teachers can learn to teach writing by teaching students to compose digital poetry. For example, Dredger, Nobles, & Martin (2017) investigated how preservice teachers used a wiki to teach high school students poetry interpretation and composition. The research suggested that digital poetry supported preservice teachers’ learning to teach poetry in digital spaces and develop students as writers. Similarly, Dymoke & Hughes (2009) used a Wiki to examine preservice teachers learning about writing poetry and teaching poetry. They found preservice teachers increased in confidence, improved technological expertise, and grew in their attitude towards mediated collaborations.

This body of research provides evidence that digital poetry can provide students an opportunity to engage in ideas, gain insight, and make meaning of their experiences through writing during these trying times. Additionally, this research demonstrates that providing teachers and preservice teachers opportunities to compose digital poetry and teach digital poetry has a positive impact on their development as writing teachers. We used this research to build tools that teachers and students could use to compose digital poetry. This paper reports on the development of two such tools that are freely accessible: *Emerge* and *Thread*.
PROCESS

Based on the existing research, our goals were to 1) develop technology for digital poetry; 2) to test out a tool for collaborative poetry creation; and 3) provide professional development for teachers. In this section, we first describe the digital tools for poetry and then explain the facilitation of professional development.

Emerge

_Emerge_ is a black out poetry tool that was initially created as an iPad application; however, it was adapted to run in an online (and mobile-friendly) environment; it is freely accessible. Users begin by selecting a community poem (see Figure 1). They then select a portion of the poem to use for the text. Finally, users click on words to create a found poem (see Figure 2).

![Figure 1. Selecting a community poem in Emerge.](image)
Thread

Thread is another digital poetry tool that is also completely online and freely accessible. **Thread** allows visitors to contribute to an ever-growing community poem using model poems and curated prompts. It is arranged thematically around a chosen event or topic. For instance, Thread is currently being used to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. Users begin Thread by responding to a prompt (see Figure 3). Depending on the prompt selected, users are given a model poem and then asked to respond to the prompt (see Figure 4). Finally, the user’s generated poem is both emailed to users and made available as part of a larger public response (see Figure 5).
Choose a prompt to respond to: *

For each prompt, read the model poem and respond with your own line or stanza.

A  I am...
B  Remember...
C  Earth's desire is...
D  Something sacred...
E  Manifesto...
F  We, this people...
G  Thank you...
H  I have been thinking about living like...

Figure 3. Prompt response example in the Thread on Earth Stanzas.
“We, this people...”

Read the excerpt of the model poem below:

A Brave and Startling Truth

by Maya Angelou

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

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Prompt Instructions: Starting with the words “We, this people,” write a declarative statement about what you think we can do to help, preserve, or appreciate this Earth. For example, “We, this people, must go out and explore the wonders of this world” or “We, this people, must abandon our differences and work together to preserve our one world.”

Figure 4. Model poem and writing prompt for Thread.
The Use of Digital Poetry to Inform Preservice Teacher Education

Professional Development

Providing teachers many opportunities to explore, create, and compose with digital tools can be an avenue of professional learning. Through immersion into writing with digital tools, teachers are better prepared to understand the composing process and have an opportunity to reflect on their teaching of digital compositions (Pytash, Testa, & Nigh, 2014).

The professional development began with the introduction of the digital tools, Emerge and Thread. We provided teachers and students writing prompts that they could use for their digital poems. We also used Zoom to meet with teachers and administrators to review the digital tools, answer questions, offer strategies for introducing the prompts to their students, and model how one might think about the composition process. Teachers and students had extensive time to craft their digital poems, which were shared through the digital tools. The experience concluded by meeting with the class for a community sharing of their digital poems.
RESULTS

Data analyses are still being conducted to examine teacher integration and feedback as well as analysis of written poems. However, the quantitative response in terms of number of poems suggests high engagement in the writing process with *Emerge* and *Thread*. This is revealed when we examine our results from two teachers in two different schools. School A used a prompt called “Instruments of Change.” The teacher gave students prompts, such as, “Together we…” and “I am…” to ask students to compose digital poetry centered on how they could be instruments of change. From the beginning of March to the beginning of April, 137 poems were created. School B focused on community building. The teacher also used prompts like “Together…” and “I am from…” A total of 120 poems were submitted between the middle of March and the middle of April.

![Figure 6. Poems about being instruments of change.](image)
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As demonstrated by the number of poems submitted, teachers and students were highly engaged in the writing process using *Emerge* and *Thread*. Using these digital tools provided writers with opportunities to share their experiences and be a part of a community of writers. Viewing these results through the ontological perspective of writing allows us to shift our attention from the texts produced and focus on “the actual experience of writing (the writer writing)” (Macaluso, 2013, p. 435). The high number of poems submitted suggests that digital tools for composing poetry (e.g., *Emerge* and *Thread*) support writers and engage them in the experience of writing.

Furthermore, the content of the poems focused on participants’ resilience, identities, and how they were establishing a sense of community even during this difficult time. Yagelski (2012) writes that “writing can – and should – be a vehicle for individual and collective transformation. And writing instruction at all levels of education can and should be about imagining and creating a better world together” (p. 189). The digital poems collected serve as evidence of how writing can be transformative act for teachers and students, as well as the school community.

We encourage teaching with these tools (for preservice teacher education or in-service professional development). *Emerge* is active and freely available on the Academy of American Poets website (https://poets.org/).
emerge). For professional development tied to a content area or focus, we also encourage teacher educators to visit “Armed With Our Voices”—an online exhibit that uses Emerge as a part of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the May 4, 1970 shootings at Kent State University (https://armedwithourvoices.org/digital-emerge).

Thread is also openly accessible in two different venues. It is used as a part of a “Global Peace Poem” exhibit (https://globalpeacepoem.com/). And, it has been used as a part of the aforementioned celebration of the 50th anniversary of Earth day (in collaboration with the Center for Earth Ethics; https://earthstanzas.com).

Furthermore, this is an invitation to join in the research on the use of Emerge and Thread. We are early in the process of data collection and would welcome collaboration with teacher educators from around the globe to determine how we can use digital blackout poetry and community poetry creation to improve teaching and learning for both preservice and in-service teacher education.

References


