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Our Stories of Becoming a College Student: A Digital Writing Project for First Year Students

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This blogging assignment serves as a low-stakes activity that encourages students to make sense of the social, emotional, and bureaucratic challenges in their transition to college, and to simultaneously develop digital literacy.

Across the United States students struggle with their transitions to college, with 1 in 3 leaving after their first year ([U.S. Department of Education 2016](#)). First Year Learning Communities (FYLC) are one component within a set of broader initiatives aimed at increasing retention rates. The FYLC model is comprised of two or three different courses sharing the same group of students and focusing on a shared theme. FYLCs provide first year students a supportive structure through collaborative learning and peer mentoring to foster better academic achievement (Kuh 2008). In this assignment, we attempted to build community by introducing a common reflective writing prompt into the curriculum of 15 FYLCs at the New York City College of Technology (City Tech), a four-year public college within the City University of New York (CUNY).[\[1\]](#) This blogging assignment serves as a low-stakes activity that encourages students to make sense of the social, emotional, and bureaucratic challenges in the transition to college, and to simultaneously develop digital literacy on a platform that will play a role throughout their college experience.

Background

Based on the work of Daiute (2014) and others who have emphasized the importance of audience, Kreniske (2017a) incorporated digital reflective prompts into a first-year seminar at a four-year school and demonstrated that students used the WordPress platform to make sense of their college transition experiences and to develop a

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supportive culture of commenting. Further, Kreniske and Todorova (2017) showed how digital platforms can be important spaces for first-year, first-generation college students to share and acquire cultural capital related to the transition to college.

In this assignment we were enthusiastic about the potential for students to use the [OpenLab](#), a campus-wide open digital WordPress and BuddyPress platform for teaching and learning based at City Tech, to develop a digital community focused on writing about and making sense of the transition to college. (For more on the OpenLab see [Rosen and Smale 2015](#).)

Implementation

Before rolling out the project, one of our main concerns was balancing the benefits of community with the risks of writing on the open Internet. Most WordPress platforms allow for administrators to define their audience, with customizable settings ranging from private (only the author) to completely open to the public. At City Tech the OpenLab platform allowed us to limit the audience to the college community who we envisioned would provide a real and interactive audience for our first-semester students as they developed their digital literacy. Additionally, limiting the project's site to college users reduced the potential for unwelcome interactions with potentially disrespectful comments and spam.

As August ended and the first-year City Tech students walked into their first college courses, the prompt was live and the project seemed on track to run as planned. Below is a screenshot of the prompt that we adapted from an oft-cited study (Walton and Cohen 2011).

We invite you to tell a story about your first few weeks at City Tech. Research has shown that first-semester students often worry about their transition in to college and how eventually students become comfortable and find a community of people with whom they are close and feel they belong.

Please describe in a short story how you have experienced your first few weeks at City Tech. Aim to write 300-500 words and be sure to illustrate your post with examples from your own experiences in classes, seminars, lectures, study groups, and labs. What happened? How did you and others involved think and feel? How did it turn out?

We hope this process will help you think about your transition experience. Once you have finished writing please take time to read and comment on at least two of your peer's stories.

To create your first post click the plus (+) sign at the top of the page! (or on the banner at the very top of the page click First Year Learning Communities, then select "add new" post from the dashboard)

Once you have finished writing your post please select your FYLC faculty member as a category.

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*Then feel free to look around and read and comment on your peers' writing!
(If you are looking to read stories from specific FYLC select faculty "category" at the bottom of the page)*

As part of the current project, we asked Peer Mentors to read all student posts and to contact their FYLC faculty if any students appeared to be experiencing an especially difficult transition, or if any students were using inappropriate or offensive language. We also asked Peer Mentors to write comments on their FYLC students' posts if the post had not received a peer comment after two to three days. To ensure Peer Mentors were proficient with the process of posting and commenting we held a one hour long training workshop to familiarize the mentors with WordPress and the specific FYLC site and then provided peer mentors [a link to some suggested comment examples](#) from Kreniske's (2017a, 2017b) previous project.

The Successes

Student and faculty participation. Overall, there was a broad range of faculty and student engagement with the reflective writing project, and membership on the FYLC site rose from 37 members in May 2017 to 123 members by December. Students across 9 different FYLCs such as "Life's Origins, the Earth, & Us," which included Biology and English, wrote nearly 100 posts and made 169 comments over the semester.

Student reflective writing and supportive commenting. This assignment elicited rich and expressive student posts and peer comments. For example, in the following screenshot of what we would characterize as a typical post, a student wrote about many challenges faced on the first day of college, among them waking up early and making friends:

My first few weeks of City Tech have been okay. I was supposed to have my first day of classes on a friday, but I also had a chess tournament in Virginia that started at 7pm on the same day. I planned to go to class that day and head to Virginia, but I forgot to pack and slept at 3am the night before and missed my first class of college and that's how my first day of college went, feeling pissed at myself for being irresponsible. The first week I was still getting used to waking up early for classes which caused me to be late to some. Other than being occasionally late, it took me two weeks to finally get my City Tech ID, so every morning before that involved me showing security my schedule on my extremely cracked phone screen. I received more and more annoyed reminders to get my ID as everyday passed. The workload is pretty light so far compared to high school, but college just started so I'm expecting it to get way harder soon. I enjoy all the free time I get now as a college student and have taken it up by working most weekdays or meeting up with old friends to play basketball when I don't have school work to do. Other than classes, college has been pretty boring. It's kind of like high school where I went in without knowing a single person. It is the same at City Tech I don't know anyone here, and I have yet to meet anyone. About three to four of my closest friends have stayed in New York City

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for college so it's not that bad, but sometimes life outside of class and work can be boring. The two weeks of college have been kind of a routine. I go to school, then work then home and occasionally meet up with my friends. I'm honestly not sure if I'm having fun or not. I'm really not sure how I feel about not having a single friend in college while all my other friends out of the city have been meeting a bunch of people and partying at their schools. I am glad I'm focused though and I have an idea of what to do with my free time and what I want out of college. Overall, the first few weeks of City Tech has not been bad, my professors are nice and all my peers seem nice too. Someone even pointed out a twenty that was going to fall out my pocket one of the days I was leaving the school. I hope I get to meet people throughout my semester here at City Tech and do well in my classes.

A classmate, who apparently keeps a similar schedule wrote this supportive comment at 1:34 a.m.

Just thought I'd let you know that you're not the only one going through those feelings. I can relate to you on the fact that most of my friends left to other school and i barely know anyone at City Tech. Anyways, you should open up to people more and see where that takes you. Maybe you'll meet someone with the same interest as you.

We see potential benefits for the post authors and for the students who read the posts and wrote comments. As in the example above, when the commenter read the initial post he could really “relate.” As instructors, we want to do everything we can to support first year students. However, there are limits to what one instructor can do and the workload for instructors is already high, especially when courses include 20, 30 and often more students. Further, it's the other students who may best understand their peers' struggles and therefore be best positioned to communicate empathy through their comments. Future researchers might also consider analyzing how students may feel differently about getting a peer comment as opposed to a comment from a professor. This assignment empowers students with a tool that they can use to develop a supportive culture in the transition to college.

Instructor insights. Instructors also gained insights into the first year experience. Instructors reported that reading through the posts and comments was incredibly useful for learning about the stresses encountered by first-year students. Instructors noted a number of posts about anxiety regarding immigration status and financial aid frustrations. While these issues were clearly important to students, these personal revelations had not been voiced in the context of classroom discussions. It appears that the digital social platform provided students with a space to work through pressing personal and political issues.

While we work to better understand student choices regarding sharing in personal and digital contexts, we were heartened to see that the digital does serve to elicit experiences and challenges that are somehow different than those discussed in class. We see two main benefits of the assignment: First, first-year students are being encouraged to reflect on their experiences and thus to use writing as a tool for making

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sense of these experiences. Second, the subsequent commenting serves as a tool for offering and receiving peer support and ultimately fosters the development of a digital community.

The Unanticipated Challenges

Unanticipated challenges ranged from issues communicating with faculty to technical challenges with the digital platform.

A clearly defined project. We discovered a difference between our expectations as project leaders and the faculty and student perceptions of the project. We had been careful to respect faculty autonomy and had given general guidelines, as opposed to exact directions, about how to include the reflective writing prompt into the curriculum. However, where we had thought of respecting autonomy, faculty may have felt a lack of guidance and support. For example, during conversations with faculty, it became apparent that some faculty assigned the prompt while others only mentioned the project and writing assignment.

Relatedly, there was some confusion among students too about the intended audience for their writing. While many students posted and commented to their peers, others appeared to be directing their writing to peer mentors or other staff. In a few cases students who were receiving extra credit were expecting their instructors, who they knew would be viewing their responses for assessment, to comment. In the future we plan to offer clear direction regarding the intended audience, the role of faculty and peer mentors, and guidelines for description and inclusion in the course syllabus.

Technical challenges. As with any new technology, students struggled to find the specific site, log-on, and author posts. However, by mid-semester, many students seemed to have learned the basics of the site and were able to post and comment. Overall, this challenge captures one critical aspect of the current project: Not only is the actual reflective writing important, but the project served as a relatively low stakes entry point into the college digital community. In addition, with WordPress serving as the content management system for approximately 30% of all websites ([W3techs](#) 2018), the skills developed during this assignment will prepare students to succeed within and beyond their college studies.

The research process. Some students were ambivalent about granting researchers permission to analyze their writing. As detailed in the study Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, we needed to follow a specific consent process. This process involved reading aloud an extensive consent form verbatim and the formal language may have caused concern for some students. While a challenge, we found it encouraging that students were thoughtful about and even skeptical of the consent process. We hope that this project, and in particular the consent process, encouraged

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students to think more broadly about their digital presence, and specifically how their online writing and other social digital activities on platforms like Facebook may be used for research purposes.

Next Steps

After considering the results of this current model, we realize there are certain steps we can take to increase faculty and student involvement.

1. Be more explicit with faculty about how to incorporate the writing prompts into their courses and how they might incorporate the writing project into their syllabus. We are going to ask faculty if they will refer to the reflective writing project on their syllabi. While we discourage any type of grading or correcting of student posts we will encourage faculty to give students credit for posting. We will also likely ask for only two posts per semester.
2. Go “old school” and ask faculty to devote 15 minutes of their first class to students writing a response to the prompt with pen and paper. Drafting the prompt in class will help students engage with the project and overcome their initial anxieties about writing. Further, the in-class activity will introduce the concept that reflective writing is an important part of developing the critical thinking and writing skills required of college students. Though the task may appear “informal,” their response to another student’s college experience facilitates critical thinking about another student’s experience and the ways that experience does or does not reflect their own.
3. Consider issues of physical and technical access. We are in the initial stages of reviewing student posts, and we have noted numerous students describing their struggles to access resources and even to find their way around campus. To address this, we will encourage FYLC faculty to take 5 minutes on the first day and walk their students to the college’s student computer labs. We also hope to engage Peer Mentors in helping students to join the OpenLab, join the FYLC OpenLab site, and post the reflective responses they first drafted in class. Finally, we are considering making the FYLC site completely open for public viewing. This will make it easier for students to view peer writing and ultimately may encourage increased participation in the project.

We hope this assignment inspires other instructors to create digital spaces for reflective writing and supportive commenting in their first-year courses.

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Notes

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[1] We were inspired by previous and ongoing models, such as the first year seminar at Baruch College (Smith 2008), and a first year seminar for Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) (Kreniske 2017a, 2017b).

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