STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVII, 4, 2022, p. 257 - 274
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2022.4.13

UNDERGRADUATE SELF-STUDY: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF IMAGESETS ON STUDENT BLOGS

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Article history: Received 8 August 2022; Revised 9 November 2022; Accepted 6 November 2022; Available online 20 December 2022; Available print 30 December 2022.

ABSTRACT. ***Undergraduate Self-study: Discourse Analysis of Imagesets on Student Blogs***. Student writers' relationship to the screen is initially grounded in their writing experiences in social media, but they come to view their course blog as a connecting space between themselves and their readership, a space which becomes one on which they self-destruct and reconstruct their identity as they learn to write (Serfaty 2004). By asking students to post a digital image of themselves, Ethna Lay initiates an important dataset, one which suggests a great deal about their relationship to writing. Through these images, students construct their independent writerly identities and simultaneously express membership in the class as a discrete discourse community. Students work collaboratively on a discourse analysis of the imageset, categorizing the class's images as data about its relationship to writing. These imagesets are an opportunity for student writers to stage themselves; they perform how they would like to be seen (or not seen). This performing of the self is at once a private act as well as a communal and public activity (Tifentale and Manovich 2015; Rettberg 2005). The screen then has a dual nature, functioning as either a veil or mirror for student writers (Serfaty 2004). Students classify the imagesets into categories or types, which are fairly consistent across classes. Oftentimes students acknowledge the class had become its own discourse community, its deixis enabled by blogging together and by investigating their blogs, and decide that this result is only possible given the nature of the blog. The students become participant-observers in this respect, and the end result is an auto-ethnography of the pictured self in a social and academic setting.

Keywords: *blogging, discourse community, images, self-study, writerly self*

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REZUMAT. ***Studenții și auto-cunoașterea: O analiză discursivă asupra seturilor de imagini din cuprinsul blogurilor studențești***. Relația studenților-scriitori începe cu experiențele lor auctoriale pe rețelele de socializare, ca mai apoi să descopere în blog (ca sarcină de curs) spațiul în care se produce conexiunea dintre ei și cititori, precum și dezasamblarea și reconstruirea identității proprii atunci când învață să scrie texte (Serfaty 2004). Trasându-le sarcina de a posta imagini cu ei înșiși, autoarea inițiază crearea unui set important de informații în virtutea faptului că acesta sugerează multe despre relația studenților cu scrisul. Prin aceste imagini studentul își reconstruiește identitatea de scriitor autonom, care își exprimă, totodată, și calitatea de membru al clasei, aceasta din urmă constituind o comunitate discursivă distinctă. Studenții realizează colaborativ o analiză discursivă asupra setului de imagini, cu imaginile clasei catalogate ca informații despre relația lor cu scrisul. Aceste seturi de imagini le oferă studenților-scriitori oportunitatea de a se pune în scenă; ei se prezintă în rolul în care își doresc a fi văzuți sau dimpotrivă. Acest joc de sine este, simultan, un act privat și o activitate comună publică (Tifentale and Manovich 2015; Rettburg 2005). Ecranul, prin urmare, capătă o natură dual, el funcționând fie ca un văl, fie ca o oglindă pentru studentul-scriitor (Serfaty 2004). Seturile de imagini sunt clasificate drept categorii sau tipuri, care se regăsesc cu relativă constanță în toate cursurile parcurse de studenți. Adesea studenții observă clasa transformându-se ea însăși într-o comunitate discursivă, deictica fiind facilitată de activitatea de *blogging* colaborativ și de studierea blogurilor colegilor. În final, aceștia ajung la concluzia că rezultatul se datorează tocmai naturii acestui tip de blog. Astfel, studenții devin observatori-participanți iar rezultatul final - o auto-etnografie în imagini în cadrul mediului social și academic.

Cuvinte-cheie*: blogging; comunitate discursivă; imagini; auto-cunoaștere; sinele auctorial*

Student writers' relationship to the screen is initially grounded in their writing experiences in social media, but they come to view their course blog as a connecting space between themselves and their readership, a space which ceases to be a phatic social arena, becoming one on which they self-destruct and reconstruct their identity as they learn to write (Serfaty 2004). By asking students to post a digital image of themselves representing their writerly selves, I initiate an important dataset, which suggests a great deal about their relationship to writing. Through images, students construct their independent writerly identities and simultaneously express membership in the class, which becomes a discrete discourse community. Using this data (images and reflections about their significance), students work collaboratively on a discourse analysis

of the imageset, categorizing the images as data about the class's relationship to writing. These images are an opportunity for student writers to stage themselves; they perform how they would like to be seen (or not seen). This performing of the self is at once a private act as well as a communal and public activity (Tifentale and Manovich 2015; Rettberg 2005). The screen then has a dual nature, functioning as either a veil or mirror for student writers (Serfaty 2004). The veil is a kind of dubious protection that may reveal as much as it conceals; the mirror is a kind of disingenuous reflection that may distort as much as it reflects.

Using their own imagesets as data, students create a user-generated categorization of image types, classifying them into categories, which appear to be consistent across classes and years. Some classes reject the veil-mirror binary, concluding that writing on blogs – and in fact all writing – is an act of exhibitionism. Others acknowledge that the class becomes its own discourse community, its deixis enabled by blogging together and by investigating their blogs, and decide that this result is only possible given the nature of the blog (Yancey 2005; Brooke 2005; Krause 2006). Through this self-study, student writers recognize and reflect on their relationship to writing, a necessary step in learning to write.

Students write, portray, and imagine themselves into a variety of multimodal spaces, and, for this study, I will focus on their presentation of themselves in image. Initially, I found students made peculiar choices in the images of themselves that they chose in order to represent their writing self. They are caught between two modes of making – word and image – one for their own social purposes, one for school. Their signals are crossed, making for their selection of odd images which do not effectively represent their relationship to writing. This discrepancy stems from the dual nature of the screen, which enables all sorts of controversial and peculiar discourses, in text and image, on the Internet. This can be related to Viviane Serfaty's findings in her study of American bloggers and diary writers, and traces this discrepancy to the paradoxical screen environment:

> The screen seemingly offers a protection against the gaze of others, enabling each diary writer to disclose intimate thoughts and deeds, thus attempting to achieve transparency and breaking the taboo of opacity regulating social relationships. The screen, which mediates Internet access, thus establishes a dialectical relationship between disclosure and secrecy, between transparency and opacity (2004, 223).

This notion is useful here in a study of student bloggers, who frequently admit they simultaneously want and do not want attention for their postings. There is a strange desire to be heard and not heard, to be seen and not seen. Writing

online for an academic setting reinforces the lesson that writing is not an isolated, solitary endeavor but instead a social negotiation. This notion is relevant to this study in that students are constructing what they know based on their own experiences in social media and adapted for a class setting. In other words, writers think they own their writing, when in fact they are participating in a dialectal process that they create. John Gallagher in *Update Culture*, writing about the influence of commentary on online posters, reinforces this importance of participatory culture (2020, 9). By introducing problem-solving, collaborative activities into a curriculum, I propose that students can collaboratively develop arguments of negotiation, persuasion and inquiry. This can be problematic "as much of the work of the writing classroom depends upon a certain amount of social cohesion" (Brooke 2005, http://cconlinejournal.org/brooke/brooke.htm), which is likely absent, or at best, hard-won in the first-year classroom. Blogs become small-world networks for the students as they read and write to each other. The blogging experience, both text and images, fosters a community of writers who feel capable to practice communication in new ways. It is incumbent upon instructors to allow students space and media to teach us how these ways function for them rhetorically.

First-year writing students have limited experience with the networks of disciplinary knowledge and limited understanding of writing practices. Additionally, their perspective of first-year writing is skewed by whether or not they self-identify as writers. Most often, students regard first-year writing class as a series of obligatory chores, a series of experiences that do not at first glance seem relevant to the real work of their prospective majors. As a result, the teaching of writing involves "subject[ing] our students to a certain, necessary degree of standardization -- shared texts, assignments, activities, evaluation criteria, ... the ethos of centralization and expertise underwrites this [learning] space" (Brooke 2005, 11). The professional at the center puts novice writers at a distinct disadvantage, making student writers feel at times fraudulent or unqualified to contribute, and at times belated, left out of the process of making and knowing. It is a weird climate for learning – in part David Bartholomae's idea of "inventing the university" (2005), part Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" (1973/1997).

In the awkward social space of the first-year writing classroom, students respond to these notions of invention or anxiety with respect to writing in their writing. In the writing classroom, student blogs are an efficient means for cultivating the dynamic agency supporting what Collin Gifford Brooke claims constitutes a necessarily deictic system – deictic in the sense that the collective knowing of the class as expressed in language is dependent on its context (2005). The collection of student blogs on the blogroll "provide a relatively

stable space for variation, a deictic system for writing, that only partly overlaps with the expectations typically found in the writing classroom. Blogs allow for a proliferation of discursive gestures, both inward and outward …" (Brooke 2005, 14).

In this research study, students prepare the work – the writing on their blogs – that becomes the object or problem of study. I have taken the "Writing About Writing" charge very literally, for students glean primary research from the writing of their peers (Downs and Wardle 2007). The kinds of primary research students can accomplish in a semester are limited. Because the proposed research was not outside of the room but rather in it, students can conduct research on their own writing and that writing is readily accessible to them on their blogs. In the blogosphere - the interstitial space between the screen and the minds of students - students re-identify themselves as writers and learners. On their blogs, they are authorized to respond and question the class discussion, to respond and question other students' writing in productive ways, and, most importantly, for this discussion, to respond and question each other's images of writerly self. When instructors ask students to interpret the collective blogwork of a course, they are enlisting students as participant-observers. When students revisit what they have made and what their peers have made from a distance, they learn even more. The content of student invention blogs is often uneven, given its nature as a place to invent and to generate meaning. Student blogs often exhibit an overwhelming amount of developmental, unrevised writing. Certainly, when students turn to evaluate each other's work, they are understandably unsure how to proceed. Having students include images of writerly self changes their relationship to writing dramatically. These images lead students to textuality when they explain them independently and collaboratively. In this way, the textual explication remediates the imagesets. The text lends credibility to their images, giving voice to their rhetorical choices. This is a productive remediation and not merely an annotation of the image but instead another representation (or re-presentation) of the student writer's self.

The prompt is an invitation to claim the blog's space by posting an image representing themselves as writers. Its intention is to give student writers another medium to communicate, another way to write themselves in. But these students are the children of social media, and they already have attached certain ideas about how to perform in an online space. This particular assignment is both familiar and novel, familiar as their Instagram accounts and novel in its academic setting or situation. This is why these images are true *essais* into an often-failed identity performance, one often communicating a partial identity, the wrong message, or a dishonest one. This exploration attempts to unpack what these student writers intended to convey by their selections. Traditional portraits and

self-portraits are coded messages, situating the subject in a particular manner that will achieve the renderer's goal. Most often, portraits invite the favorable opinion of the viewer, showcasing the subject as desirable, either in appearance or social status. Portraits are imbued with clues that project attributes for the viewer's consideration. In the case of the images shared on student blogs, it may be argued that the production of or selection of digital images is not as thoughtful nor time consuming as a commissioned portrait, so these comparisons have no parity. However, students' experiences with social media – as both consumers and producers – have prepared them or predisposed them to make rhetorical choices that resonate and are effectively meaningful and consistent with their purposes as makers. I argue that, by their first year of college, they likely have more experience in the *produsage* of images than with writing. They inscribe the world via imaging well before they write long-form texts. I would also argue that contemporary students create, curate, and post so consistently that they are absolutely mindful of their sharing's impact and are their own brand managers. Given their expertise as image-makers, students are equally expert image assessors.

The first part of my argument then is that students are better prepared to compose (or at least more experienced) in images and self-portraits than they are to write. Whether or not they select an image that appropriately responds to the prompt's invitation is the next consideration. My students make a blog with an [About] page hosting a digital image that suggests something of the student writer's relationship to writing. The assignment prompt follows:

> Your first assignment is to set up your own blog dedicated to the work of this course. Use wordpress.com and choose a title for your blog that suggests something about the blog's purpose as a space to generate, develop, and present ideas and arguments. Next, you should draft a short [About] page that indicates something about your writerly self. You may also wish to include a digital image of yourself, especially one that suggests something about the way you feel about writing.

Having blogged with students since 2009, I have a great deal of data that shows how student writers benefit and grow from the variety of opportunities to compose in a social platform. However, I focus this investigation on the images students use to represent themselves as writers, and, when available, I pair them with their written explanations and their peer collaborative analyses of those images. For this study, I share data from three time periods: (i) group who can opt to post a non-required image representing their writerly self (2009 – 2011); (ii) group who posts a required image representing their writerly self with accompanying explanation (2015); and (iii) group who posts a required

image representing their writerly self with accompanying explanation and with the added collaborative self-study of the class imageset (2016). The students of the latter groups, 2015 and 2016, become participant-observers in this respect, drawing keen distinctions realized between the student writers who post singly and those who self-study. The end result is an auto-ethnography of the pictured self in a dual setting, equally social and academic.

Beginnings 2009 – 2011

Before the assignment to post an image of writerly self was mandated, less than half the students elected to share one. Using a sample of 165 student blogs over four semesters (Fall 2009, Spring 2010, Spring 2011, and Fall 2011), only 43% of students posted an image (see Figure 1). Willingness to post an image representing one's writerly self divided sharply along gender lines, with women twice as likely to share an image than men. This ratio is consistent with gendered social media practices of the time, with women more readily sharing their digital portraits than men (Subrahmanyam and Smahel 2011).

Number of total blogs	165
Number of blogs with images	71
Number of blogs without images	94
Percentage of blogs with images	43%
Number of blogs by women	102
Number of blogs by women with images	54
Percentage of blogs by women with images	52.9%
Number of blogs by men	63
Number of blogs by men with images	16
Percentage of blogs by men with images	25%

Figure 1. Data from four semesters: 2009 - 2011

During this period, students treated their images like other social media photos, glamorized shots which presented them as attractive but not actually representing their relationship to writing. Female-identifying students favored direct poses. When male-identifying students shared images, they were often obscured, picturing themselves in costume, in groups or substituting their selves with inanimate objects. Moreover, what students were representing via their selected images was often undecipherable and unresponsive to the assignment prompt. In the first years of blogging (2009 – 2011) with students,

many used attractive representations of self that were optimized for some other purpose but did not effectively fulfill the assignment's prompt. Students anticipated how they would have liked to be perceived, and they presented or staged themselves for a variety of readers. But who did they think they were writing to? They sidestepped the academic situation. Curious about their intentions, I introduced an assignment asking them to reflect on the images. By asking students to explain their own image, I would learn a great deal about the correlation of image to the student writer's identity. In their reflections, students would similarly learn a great deal about their writing practices as well.

2015

The next stage of this investigation began in spring 2015. Forty students in two sections of the second course of the first-year writing sequence participated. As part of their blog project, students were asked to include an image of their writerly self with accompanying explanatory text. It should be noted that 7/40 (or 17.5%) students did not complete this assignment, which is a sizable non-compliance rate. For these non-participating students, there may still have been residual hesitation about how social media is used in a classroom environment. Note, however, that while all the students blogged publicly, 17.5% of students chose not to post images representing their writerly selves. A review of these posts, including images of writerly self from that semester, shows certain types of images that emerged, which were consistent with earlier years. In my estimation, students staged themselves in the following categories: (i) idealized, (ii) awkward/not idealized, (iii) in costume, (iv) in a group, and (v) via substitution. This assessment seemed to ask certain research questions, including: Why are their images of the same types? Are they derivative? Or, are they representative of a larger cultural influence of the images they post in social media elsewhere? These, however, are my observations and my questions, and not the ones that my future students would ask. I will return to this in my discussion relevant to 2016. My investigation reconsidered my assessment of the student writer's intentions. By asking students to reflect on their images, I might learn how these photos are legitimate commentaries on their relationship to writing. I would learn to think differently about their images. Maybe these images are not commentaries, but instead, serve as writing itself and appropriately represent their relationship to writing and the way these students inscribe the world. In 2015, I decided to make the assignment required. In this section, I will share a descriptive sample of the images students chose in order to represent themselves as writers.

What I observed is that students opted to share idealized and perfected images of themselves to claim the blog's space as a way to socialize. Their over-determined images of writerly self ultimately do not share something of themselves as writers. Instead, this rhetorical move gestures toward another understanding of *blogwork* that is related to the presentation of the self on other social media platforms. Other students crafted more responsive images to represent their writerly selves, including substituting images of themselves enacting other creative activities such as playing the violin or using a camera. They seemed to be suggesting that they were not writers, but that they inscribed the world using other apparatus and with other modes of inscription. These, too, were idealized, offering a comparable substitution for the assignment.

Students also use images with awkward compositions, acknowledging the limits of their choice in their written reflections about them. Awkward compositions mimic or correlate with the social media practices of users on sites like Finsta (aka fake Instagram) or B-Roll; both social media sites add another layer, a produced reality that purports to be more authentically representative of the real. These sites are limited to discrete communities of followers or insiders.

Students who post deliberately awkward images of self are not ostensibly addressing their inner circle of friends but rather a new community, located in the classroom and occupied by peers, as well as by the instructor. Such postings might also correlate with their feelings of writing apprehension in that such a not-idealized image parallels their awkward status as a developing writer, signaling an acceptance of the constraints – whether skill or time – that limit their ability to write. One particularly awkward composition has the student writer, Steph T, presented while hugging another person whose face is not visible. The two are wrapped in a plush, blue blanket. The image does not reveal much of the student's body, but her face in profile is clearly smiling. The composition of the photo seems incidental, with the student's head centered in the layout. At first glance, the photo is not memorable, but her writing enlarges its import. She notes:

> The image of my writerly self isn't anything special. The blanket I cover myself in is meant to hide myself because I don't identity myself as a writer, but at the same time you can clearly see me smiling. I guess the best way to explain how I feel about writing, and how it relates to this image in general is that even though I don't identify myself as a writer, I still secretly enjoy writing. I know that sounds a little complicated, but I guess I've just never thought my writing was any good, and I think that being a writer means something a little more professional than writing essays for class. Writing in the traditional sense isn't something

> I particularly enjoy, I don't know anyone who looks forward to writing an essay for a class, but I enjoy expressing thoughts through unconventional forms of writing. In relation to the image the blanket hides how I feel about writing outwardly, but the facial expression and clear view of my countenance expresses my feelings for other types of writing through images and movies.
>
> EXPLAINING MY WRITERLY SELF, April 24, 2015. Retrieved June 14, 2022 https://anotherwaywithwords.wordpress.com/2015/04/24/explaining-my-writerly-self/

The student discloses that while she does not identify as a writer, she "still secretly enjoy[s] writing." Her relationship to writing is contradictory, or, as she explains, "complicated." Perhaps she co-opts the metaphor of the blanket to cover and conceal in the same way that Jill Walker Rettberg adopts the metaphor of the veil (*Blogging* 2014). But the concealment is disingenuous, for this student writer secretly enjoys writing. How can both be true? Is this an invitation for the reader to find the writer and give her back to herself? Can her revelation that she is a writer in other media – in images and film – be key to making sense of her presentation? What is fascinating about this set of students in 2015 is that they are coy about writing. And yet, they are performing their various selves unabashedly, on their own terms, even though the assignment is required. At this time, these are low-stakes assignments. No one is required to post them, but most students do. This participation suggests that the interface matters, as does the time. Because students have become more accustomed to working in social media in the context of the academy, they accept the assignment more readily.

They also adopt the practices familiar in social media, like selfies, for academic purposes. Not all images recorded are selfies, but the majority are. In recent years of blogging with my students, there has been a movement away from idealized images of self towards a progressive use of selfies. Those pictures never actually nor accurately represented how the student writer felt about writing or about their writing self, but that identity can be secured by reading their reflective posts in combination with viewing their images. But the selfie occupies another space in that it permits the student writer or maker some autonomy in its making. And this making of the self-portrait reveals an important stage for the student writer. Selfies return agency to the student writer in that they manage their self-representation. Rettberg (*Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* 2014) discusses the changing nature of self-representation with digital technologies, especially as it relates to the idea of self-documentation. She shares that selfies, as self-portraits, employ a device that can "simultaneously

see our reflection and record it" (11). This is an important distinction, as selfies permit the maker some control in the image-making. Rettberg contends: "A selfie also exists in a social context, once shared. But just as importantly, creating and sharing a selfie is a form of self-reflection and self-creation" (12). The images of writerly self that students post are akin to the profile photos posted on various social media platforms (e.g. Facebook), except that student bloggers usually post their image only once and not serially. Rettberg explains the role of profile photos as visual identity this way: "We often use photographs taken by other people for our profile pictures, so they are not always selfies, but a profile picture is a visual expression of our identity, and our choice of profile photos is clearly a form of visual self-representation" (*Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* 2014, 40). The serial nature of these images is a reflection of change, that an individual is growing. In a course setting, a fourteen-week period, it is less likely that a student will feel compelled to offer multiple profile pictures. Serial profile pictures suggest an evolution in identity, one that student writers do not readily present in academic settings, but the single image is reflection enough for the purposes of this study. The images put forward are curated, with exigences that do not always correlate with writing. What they always do offer is a kind of wishful thinking, a wistfulness perhaps, a wish-fulfillment strategy whose purpose is clear: "I want to be seen this way." More than this, they seem to present the idea that their reasons do not need to be explicit, or "My reasons are clear to me, even if they do not seem related to the prompt." While students are not necessarily responding to the assignment prompt from the instructor's perspective, they believe their response is appropriate, reasoning perhaps that their image of writerly self indeed embodies their identity for this context.

On occasion, the images represent and perhaps even reject text by embracing some other way to inscribe the world, some other sequel to literacy. For instance, Dylan L, a non-native English speaker, reveals himself as an expert photographer on his blog, communicating effectively across language and culture through his camera's lens. For his image of writerly self, Dylan poses against a large wall, brightly covered in graffiti. His slim form seems a kind of dark exclamation point across a wall of text which is equally word and image, hybrid writing that is unconventional and stylized. What this photo's composition suggests to me is the swelling of language into enlarged, bright, colorful shapes. In short, text becomes image. Moreover, the posture of the student against the wall declares – or rather dares – the viewer-reader to contradict the power of the image. Indeed, in this instance, writing yields.

Similarly, Alessandro I, another non-native English speaker, presents himself as a young child, posing as if lifting a large boulder, to depict his writerly self. The student's agency in this image is more powerful than at first glance.

The child is just tall enough for his fingertips to brush the lintel's overhang. There is pride, true sweetness, in the child's expression, some coyness that suggests he is well pleased. Indeed, this student writer is delighted with himself. Alessandro's blog title, "Write or be written," evinces this determination as well. This signals determination to get the job – this first-year writing class – done. He has committed to doing the work at hand, but he also flirts with his readers via the posted image. Posing as a small child with lofty ambitions, the student offsets his bravado, counterbalancing it with cuteness.

There are students in this cohort who elect not to include images, and they suggest reasons for their non-compliance. Brenden M declares: "I really don't have a writerly self. It is more like some random dude who shows up sometimes and does writing assignments when he needs to and spaces out in other classes to write dumb stories…" He presents himself as "some random dude," an intellectual vagrant who "shows up sometimes" and performs itinerant labor on demand. This character, who "does writing assignments," seems a lackluster, uncommitted player. He makes an interesting declaration, using the modal "do" to contrast "I do writing assignments." with the declarative "I write." or perhaps with "I am a writer." There is little agency in Brenden's [About] page and, of course, no image of writerly self shared. While Brenden does confess to enjoyment in writing, especially with respect to sharing the many "dumb ideas that float around in my head," he puts himself forward as a writer and then hastily retreats. He is at once engaged and not engaged. He is performing both roles. His [About] page concludes poignantly: "… but I am kind of a weaker writer so the writings don't contain all I want to share." This moment, when he declares his writing apprehension, is worth waiting for.

Another student, Brianna O, is clearly overthinking her presentation of writerly self. In her [About] page, 21 out of 144 of the words she employs are personal pronouns. The preponderance of pronouns suggests the writer's desire to denote perspective and point of view for her readers. She is tentative about what her blog will and will not do. She is effectively illogical, employing circular reasoning: "I've never blogged before but writing is a way to express yourself and your ideas about the world, so I guess this is what my blog will do." Her blog will ***do***, not her. The blog has agency. No writer here, just the medium, and the writer is invisible or rather a non-entity. Brianna O acknowledges the disconnect between herself and her writing. She is pictured in her image of writerly self, but she is quite reduced and practically indiscernible. She does not distinguish herself in the outdoor café setting, admitting instead how she prefers to remain unobtrusive: "In my image of writerly self, my face is hidden, facing away from the camera. I am far from the camera and seem fairly small in comparison to the surroundings."

She is indeed camouflaged, but she is direct in her writing about her concealment. Her writerly self is not for viewing, but her text is.

The texts of student blogs afford the possibility of an authentic audience. In online spaces, students initially perform some other version of self, something close to what they have already constructed as their online persona or presentation of self. They reveal this relationship to the screen in image and in text. For instance, Dylan's [About] page does not express his relationship to writing at all. Instead, it is a clever play on a personal ad: "Made in China… ." But paired with his image – one dominated by street art – his message is clear: I have no textual identity to share at this time. He reinforces this in his short second paragraph, which is wrought with generalities and is noncommittal. While his text lacks fluency, his text in concert with his image evinces clarity.

What are these students professing about their views of themselves as writers? Are they responding to some activity that I did not fully understand and thus could not interpret? What am I (and other readers) to make of such presentations? It seems that the ways student writers see themselves respond to a cultural moment. Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich's *Selfiecity* (2015) demonstrates the way selfies conform in international macro-settings, and this data helps me understand what happens in my classroom micro-setting. The creative mind evaluates the opportunity to present and puts forward what it thinks best fits. But what is fitting is up for interpretation. Note that fit-ness or suitability of an image is variable. These images are not always responsive to the prompt which asks students to visualize themselves in relation to writing. Student writers in 2009-2011 responded in a particular way, distinct from student writers in 2015 and 2016. (Post-COVID, student writers in 2021 are different again, but that is a subject for another study.) Student writers are perpetually in new territory when writing in social media for the university, regardless of the year. Students' control of their self-presentation suggests an important departure from their former ideas of school and assignments. Because students compose in this non-academic and radically un-school space, they abandon whatever prior knowledge they have about school genres and present something simultaneously more honest and more deceptive. Their response to the prompt "who am I when I write online?" seems to be "I am who I want to be." They inhabit a new literacy moment, informed by their frequent, ludic experiences in social media. Nonetheless, this presentation of self is somehow bounded, some hybrid self. Two selves meet and generate a curious misfit, and I can see what fitting images they have crafted after all.

For their last assignment, I asked them to collaborate in small groups to share what they observed about the imagesets students posted. They made some stunning observations. For instance, in the case of Alessandro I's image of

writerly self as a child pretending to lift a boulder, one group responded that he looks strong. They did not remark on the facetious pretense of the child lifting the stone but instead noted the young boy's alleged presentation of strength. This observation strikes me as generous but also important. This student writer adopted a picture that, on the one hand, claimed that he is young and inexperienced, but on the other hand, portrayed him as strong. In other words, his image of writerly self announces that he may be a young writer, but he imagines himself a capable one.

Another group was surprised that family was not represented more frequently in the images. The group argued that family should have been pictured more frequently, given the origins of literacy. This absence, the group decided, was a glaring omission. They questioned why student writers – themselves included – failed to recognize and thus represent their family members as literacy partners in the images of writerly self. This was another odd moment for me. They were applying new values and a new awareness of literacy to what could be presented in the images and potentially based on what they had reviewed in the class.

A third group categorized the images by creating a description for each. Afterwards, the group sorted and generalized the images into five representative categories, although their categories often overlapped and intersected in interesting ways. Their categories (i. personal, self-reflection; ii. calming, good vibes; iii. emotion; iv. chaos within perfection; and v. determined, showing within) were not systematically coded, making for slippage among the types. I was going to have to work with future students on the formation of more meaningful categories. However, I did not want to be overly prescriptive in doing so; I wanted to learn what only they could teach.

2016

In spring 2016, I adopted a new approach. During a class meeting in late April, far enough into the semester that there was an established sense of community among class members, each student revised her [About] page to include an image of her writerly self and added language in her [About] page articulating the meaning of the image. Small groups peer reviewed each other's [About] pages. Students sorted the images of writerly self into two categories, namely "mirror" (as a reflection of actual, physical self) or "veil" (as a replication or re-appropriation of a concealed, disguised self). The class considered whether or not these visual arguments were rhetorically consistent. In other words, the class discussed whether or not these two distinctions necessarily or consistently documented a positive or pejorative view of one's relationship to writing. In other words, if a student writer shared an image of writerly self categorized as

a mirror, did they necessarily signal or correlate to a positive relationship to writing? This discussion was fruitful on many levels, most especially in how effectively students discussed the ways the images both reveal and conceal. In the next meeting, the class complicated its understanding of these images as mirrors or veils through reading two brief excerpts from Serfaty's *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs* (2004). After discussing the excerpts, the groups separated the images into new categories and re-sorted the images into their own, newly prescribed categories.

Kathryn's Group	Tia's Group	Emma's Group	Anthony's Group	Shelly's Group
self	artsy	natural self	with nature	physical self - mirror
nature	thought provoking	hidden self	with technology	nature - veil
inanimate objects	writerly	interest	with personal information/ hobbies/interests	technology - veil
abstract(ion)	transparent	concept	with blog title	interest - mirror

Figure 2. Group Categories of Imagesets (2016)

Serfaty expresses the difference between the veiled and mirrored aspects of computer and digital presentation, rightly calling this mirror-veil binary "the paradoxical twofold metaphor" (13). Indeed, by asking students to post images of their writerly selves, I have crossed wires. Students readily assessed this interference, with Kathryn's group noting: "A computer is a veil because nobody can actually see the person who posts something online. Users know that the writer is there, but they will never see them in person." In this way, my request to stage themselves online is transgressive. Students re-sorted categories along the mirror-veil rubric, which they initially splintered into many categories, just as their 2015 predecessors had done. Ultimately, they settled on the categories for the imagesets in Figure 2. Kathryn D's group denied the overt veil distinction, favoring instead a four-part categorization that essentially only reveals: self, nature, inanimate objects, and abstract[ion]. Kathryn D's group concluded that the symbolism of many of the images is a substitution for and not a cover for writerly identity, stating that: "On a symbolic level, the screen veils an author's face yet offers a blank slate where fantasies and dreams can be projected and come to life." While this group's last three categories might be deemed veil-like, Kathryn D's group did not interpret them this way. The group declared that, by the end of the semester, they could read each other's signs and interpret the objects pictured as stand-ins for one's writerly self (e.g. a basketball equals Erin T; a book, Emma S).

Tia D's group also crafted four categories for the same imageset, which at first glance appear wildly different. Tia D's group assessment initially seemed much less sophisticated, given that they did not set down nor define parameters for their categories. For instance, it is difficult to know what characteristics distinguish images coded as *artsy* from *thought provoking*. However, their explanation when they defined the categories revealed some meaningful synchronicity between the two groups. The group explained: "We first got the idea of creating a 'transparent' category from excerpt A (Serfaty) where the author creates a spectrum from opaqueness to transparency." The group co-opted the term transparent to mean that the images revealed the self (or natural self), concluding: "Through these images we are reflecting our hopes and dreams, thoughts, and hobbies. Similar to how we recreated our textual essays in Prezi, our [About] images allow us to recreate our pages visually." This group understood the image as a remediation of their text. Moreover, the students' interpretation was derived in part from what they had learned about each other during the semester. Most of their knowing, I would argue, was based in reading each other's blogs. This deixis helps us to understand the developing student writer. Here-and-now becomes a worthwhile object of self-study for a class, its relativity a valued asset. Oftentimes, we understand knowing as the accumulation of things discovered. What happens in this context, when knowing is relational, is that students can represent their particular vision and understanding of the deictic moment of a singular semester and contribute to some larger knowing. Both of the two groups presented, Kathryn D and Tia D, reframed Serfaty's paradigm into a more nuanced classification for their particular class. They supported their claims by working with the imagesets, as discrete images and as a group, in combination with the student writer's companion written reflections.

Conclusion

Students' rhetorical moves in presenting their imaged selves – how they stage themselves - are fairly consistent over time. Their images propose ostensibly what they believe is a favorable portrait, but what does this portrait favor? Caught between their online social identity and an academic exigence, students play it safe for the most part. Their images can be sorted neatly into a series of types which tell the story—or some part of the story—of their relationship to writing.

A careful study of these types reveals something more of the online folklore of their educational and online experiences. Sometimes they disclose that they are not academically situated as writers—that teachers do not always appreciate their writing—but that they feel strongly that they have some inherent creativity that they long to nourish. This wish-fulfilment pose is prevalent, which positions the instructor as both wizard and antagonist. Vanquishing an

assessor is liberating, and here, in the blogosphere, a writer can reach multiple audiences who will know better. In a blogging environment, with multiple potential readers, assessors proliferate. The audience is distributed among instructor, peers, invited readers, and future readers. The onus for communication is returned to the writer, which makes the writer newly accountable. As student bloggers accept this agency, they make all sorts of appeals, and an important one is mediated through their self-portrait. There are frequent motifs that have recurred every semester in students' presentations of writerly self; they picture their younger selves, as innocent and sometimes disheveled babies, in costumes, in company, with a significant other, with their faces obscured, turned away from the camera, as a graphic, avatar, or meme. And each of these suggests a kind of deficiency or lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves. By suggesting a sense of inadequacy in their self-representations, students share their apprehension about doing this work, and they also share their comprehension about the value of reflecting on who they are as writers. One does not learn to write in absolute stages; one learns to accept the interactions as mutable and layered. Writing well takes persistence and maturity. The inclusion of a writerly self that suggests inadequacy or lack of experience is a fruitful step in understanding the complexity of writing as an activity system. The sweetness of these images is consistent with the hopefulness that students have as they enter the first-year writing classroom.

A portrait satisfies many goals—cultural, aesthetic, patron—and a self-portrait is just as careful in a more self-serving way. As one seeking approbation, the student writer who understands this task or outcome crafts a writerly image that answers the prompt directly. The key is to find out what prompt they are answering. In their companion written reflections, students try to explicate the why of their choices. In other semesters, when this reflection was not assigned, I was sometimes mystified by what the images purported. The combination of image and text led them to a more complete understanding of how they fashioned themselves. They tell themselves. And in the telling, in this self-reflection, they grow as writers and critical thinkers.

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