

Introduction to the Portfolio

“Dancing with Words: From My CLASP Notebooks”

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As I am writing these words, I have come to the end of the CLASP capstone project. It has a form of a portfolio including three elements. There is a written text as well as a podcast and an audio essay, which are different entry points into the capstone project's idea. This idea is centered on the question “how are different types of writing conducive to nurturing one's individual voice?” I want to offer a few words of introduction or explanation why my capstone project took this form of a portfolio where the written text is remediated into a podcast and an audio essay.¹ I hesitate slightly about where a good point would be to start the story to make it useful to you. Some of this hesitation has to do with the fact that this capstone project took shape over a long time, organically, and eventually evolved into this portfolio.

The capstone project was an assignment intended as a culmination and a crowning point of the CLASP Fellows Program. The Fellows Program was a long period of engaging with a set of problems and questions regarding writing across the curriculum with the use of the IWT techniques. With the capstone project we were offered an almost complete freedom as to what our individual projects could be. I found the freedom of the brief challenging, and the portfolio is a result of my wrestling to define my own boundaries and limits of this freedom. The key problem the capstone presented for me has to do with the fact that CLASP was designed to allow us to experience the writing techniques ourselves alongside other Fellows. It was a setup which was to be seen as a model of our future teaching practices in our own classrooms with our students. I struggled with how to build on this intense experience of practice and somehow expand it or develop it into a capstone project.

At first, I approached the capstone as a scholarly research piece, an article or a book chapter, where I tried to explore the use of non-alphabetical modalities such as podcasts and video essays to support, foster or enrich writing to learn. I was working on the question “which specific IWT techniques can lend themselves best for such multimedial expansion?” In time I narrowed my interest to sound only as

I realized that I was particularly interested in the ways IWT techniques nurtured the emergence of an individual writing voice. I read with interest the scholarship on multimodality from the composition and rhetoric studies. I even uncovered some fascinating convergences between composition/rhetoric studies and my own field of media studies, particularly around early multimodality research from the 1960s and 1970s that emerged alongside growing interest in electronic media like television, audio, and video recorders. These connections were rich and held a lot of promise. But as I was uncovering these different threads and interrelations, I also felt that the more I was going down this research route the more I was moving away from what the core meaning of the Fellows Program held for me and from what my capstone should really be about. I didn't know how to resolve the growing discomfort I felt; I knew what I didn't really want to do but had no idea what to replace it with. Finally, as I was writing yet another piece of Private Freewriting about how stifled I was feeling about the direction I took for the capstone, I realized that I had to give myself permission to start working on another piece of writing to try and resolve this tension. At that stage I decided to carry on working on two pieces in parallel – the research one and the one in which I will write just about me and what CLASP meant for me as me, as an academic and as a writer. The idea of the other more personal, intimate piece not informed by proper academic research felt so outrageous to me that I ended up writing it on the margins, across the page and at the back of my notebook. This oblique kind of writing (marginalized, off-center and circling the white page rather than populating it) made me realize that I entered some kind of liminal space in me. And this writing off-center or around or across the center was the only way in which it could come into being. I couldn't see any relation yet between my interest in multimodal writing and this writing on the margins and edges. And then the writing just took over as it unexpectedly pushed itself into center stage – the visibility I continue to struggle with – when I came across a call for papers from the Contemporary Women's Writing Association. The Association was organizing its annual conference and was looking for any kinds of contemporary writings by women. It felt like the right step to send a proposal, which is here:

“Dancing with Words”: Finding One's Voice through Process Writing. From the notebooks of a mid-career humanities Eastern European woman academic in London.

This talk is constituted by an autoethnographic reflection on my experience of participating in the two-year long professional CLASP Fellows Program at the Institute for Writing and Thinking/IWT at Bard College, US. The Fellows Program aims at training academics in the IWT writing techniques

to promote writing across the curriculum at universities participating in the Open Society University Network (OSUN), of which my institution was part. I will explore the motivations underpinning my decision to engage in the Fellows Program and ways in which it helped me begin to achieve and realize my goals, particularly those of living differently in the English language, which is not my first language, and from which academic variant I became gradually and painfully estranged during my academic career. The reflection will be based on the required writings I completed during the Fellows Program to explore which of the writing techniques and exercises were most helpful in developing my own writing voice, which was different from my voice as a teacher and a research academic, but which informed both in the long run. My autoethnographic exploration will be contextualized in the writings of bell hooks and informed by the epistemic gap affecting Process Writing in British academia. This gap means that writing across the curriculum and process writing are not valued in the UK in the same way it is done in the US liberal arts academic context through research, pedagogies, and practices of writing, composition, and rhetorical studies. The cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of students and academics in the UK HE today points to the urgent need to reconsider the value of Process Writing in the UK context to allow for the new voices in English to emerge and become audible.

This proposal was accepted, and I wrote and presented a twenty-minute paper which became the kernel of the text of my capstone project.

For some time after, I carried on with both projects – the research-based and the autoethnographic one – until a conversation with two of the other CLASP Fellows Cohort ‘25 members, Néka Da Costa and Erzsébet Strausz, who encouraged me to develop the autoethnographic angle for my capstone project. It was the most surprising suggestion to me. But I breathed the sigh of relief and got on with it. Later I received a round of written detailed suggestions from Erzsébet which allowed me to emphasize the personal dimension in the narrative of the capstone project. It was thanks to that gentle, generous, imaginative, and inquisitive feedback that I was finally able to write the text you can read here.

Yet, even after what felt like a radical turn as the marginal piece turned into a centerpiece, my interest in the multimodality of writing techniques didn’t go away. Rather, over time it became stronger as my interest in generative AI has been growing. I decided to take what felt like a plunge on the deep end and co-create some elements of my capstone portfolio with generative AI. The result is the podcast and the audio essay.

With the help of ChatGPT I created a podcast based on the text I wrote. I used another generative AI text-to-voice platform, Luvvoice, to create an audio essay of the same text. Both the podcast and the audio essay follow very closely the written text but in different ways. Both complicate the key ideas of the capstone which investigates ways in which writing helps foster one's individual voice. The creative process involving AI ended up dislodging writing as the main source of such a voice. This can be called unintended consequences of one's curiosity in these new technologies. If you get as far as listening to either the podcast or the audio essay, or both, you may be surprised to hear the AI-generated voice presented as my (Dorota's) voice. I didn't want AI to clone my own voice which left me with the only option of relying on the voices the AI platforms were proposing. It is not surprising, or maybe it is, that on the long list of options there wasn't one which would convey the Polish accented British-American sound of my voice. Compromises and choices had to be made. In the end I am surprised by how I sound on these recordings. This voice which is not mine speaks for me (audio essay) and discusses my ideas as me (podcast). Clearly, there is another piece to be written about the status of these AI-generated voices of mine and ways in which they remediated my original text particularly in the case of the podcast; it was ChatGPT which wrote the script and chose the voices based on my prompts. It is worth reflecting on the impact such AI-generated voices may have on you as listeners in the context of an autoethnographic piece like mine. I anticipate the awkwardness of these choices particularly for those listeners who know my own voice. But I let it be. I felt the capstone project gave me permission to open this door into the AI world without expecting me to offer any answers yet. For now, this door thus remains open as my own voice has expanded in the ways I didn't anticipate.

Thank you for reading me, for listening to my many voices and for accompanying me to this point. I hope it was all worth it for you. It was for me.

NOTES

- ¹ Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.