

# "I am a black cat, letting day come and go": Multimodal Conversations in a Poetry Workshop

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## Abstract

*Why do people bring together different modes of communication? Our study examines multimodal conversations held in a creative writing workshop in an elementary school. Different modes of communication were necessary to enable students to create poetry. We discuss communication modes as a construction between the material qualities of a communication medium, and the cultural and social practices evident in its use. We describe the ways in which persistent and ephemeral modes are woven together to enable creative conversation between students and a poetry workshop staff members. In order to fully understand how persistent and ephemeral modes come together, we problematize their conception with the notion of temporality.*

## 1. Introduction

Our study examines multimodal conversations at a poetry workshop in a bilingual elementary school in a largely Hispanic Southern Californian community. We traced the development of the conversations over the course of one school year, analyzing the context in which the poetry workshop took place, its outcomes, and its motivations.

Mikhail Bakhtin [1], a Russian literary theorist from the 1930s, understood that literary works are born from a constant social dialogue. There is always a context, a situation to which authors must respond. In his *Dialogic Imagination* he said:

*The word in a living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented towards a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer direction.*

Using Bakhtin's understandings, a persistent conversation continues alive is *dialogical*. The words of that conversation constantly require an answer, and its meaning is created collectively by its participants.

Berglund [4] analyzed how concurrent conversations, some mediated by technology and some face to face, influence each other. She was concerned with how a subject can navigate between different modes of communication. Berglund defined a mode as "the material qualities of the medium of delivery," denoting a mode as the sum of its physical affordances in the Gibsonian sense [3]. We define a multimodal conversation as one that uses different modes of communication (in Berglund's sense), engages multiple participants, extends over time, and incorporates the culture and practices of participants. We believe Berglund's notion requires elaboration so that we can understand the reasons why different modes of interaction are put together. As Jewitt noted, *modes* as an organized set of resources for making meaning, are affected by practice [4]. The more a mode is used by a community, the more articulated it becomes. Modes are the outcome of the ways culture shapes a medium [4]. The characteristics of each mode are constructed by their physical affordances and the cultural conventions that emerge when they are used.

Building on Berglund and Jewitt [4, 5] we analyze how ephemeral modes (oral, aural, and body language) and persistent modes (paper-based, electronic) are used in a single multimodal conversation, and how the permanence and fixity of a mode affect meaning making. This extension allows us to discriminate between the material qualities of persistent modes of communication, and those that arise from social practices.

Our research views multimodality as a practical endeavor. We ask: How and why is a combination of modes, each with its particular characteristics and affordances, necessary for a conversation?

To understand how context affects meaning making processes at personal and group levels, we use Activity Theory [4, 7]. Its cultural-historical perspective provided us with a framework to understand the development of the Poetry Academy and students over time. In particular we draw on the

concepts of polymotivation, internalization, externalization, and the zone of proximal development.

People express meanings by selecting and using the resources that are available to them in a particular moment [4]. Deciding if a message should be sent by email or delivered face-to-face requires an individual to rely on the appropriate social conventions. Different modes provide different functions for making meaning.

Language is a system of signs, as are images, music, dance, or even social customs [5]. According to Halliday, [8] every sign has three functions: “ideational,” which tells us something about the world; “interpersonal” that tells us about our position relative to someone or something, and “textual” which is how the meaning fits against the structures of discourse.

In the email versus face-to-face example, the ideational function of the message is the content itself; the “interpersonal” function reveals the sender’s position (e.g., the message is important for the sender); the “textual” function positions the message into a discourse (e.g., an official or informal message as part of a larger discourse.)

The meaning making process is affected by the use of different modes of communication. Each mode will imprint certain characteristics to the sign that is produced. The selection of the modes depends on the motives that people have. Continuing with the previous email vs. face-to-face example, a person will have to make a conscious decision, based on his or her motivations, to send an email or make a personal visit to convey the message.

The use of modal resources is constrained by the culture in which they are embedded. In the hypothetical email example, the person would have to consider if culture he or she is in is very formal. In that case email would be more suitable, as it provides a written record. However, in an informal culture, an email message could be considered awkward and it would be better to say the message in person. Modes are used differently in different cultures [4].

Multimodal analysis has been employed for analyzing discourse in social interactions and in the workplace [9]. In the classroom setting multimodal analysis has been frequently employed to understand how literacy is practically achieved [4, 5, 10].

We analyze communication modes in terms of their ephemerality and persistence. Lindtner and Nardi [11] found that “ephemeral conversations emerge around persistent artifacts bringing them into the foreground and making them meaningful while persistent artifacts spark ephemeral conversations.” Ephemeral conversations are important in making persistent artifacts meaningful.

An important aspect of ephemerality and persistence is its temporal aspect. Bolter [18] explained that the value associated with the printed mode, the prototypical persistent mode, is grounded in its permanence and fixity. A persistent mode allows our messages to be retained over time. An ephemeral mode does not retain a record of the interactions it mediated.

However, we will argue that the degree to which a mode is persistent or ephemeral is not only a product of its physical affordances, but also the cultural practices that shape those modes.

## 2. Field site and methods

### 2.1 Broader Social Context

In the United States, there is large gap in academic achievement between students of Mexican origin and white students in K-12. As a result, a disproportionate percentage of Mexican-Americans are placed in remedial or occupational tracks, leave school before 12th grade, and have the lowest high school graduation among all other ethnic groups [12]. In a 2006 U.S. Census survey [13], 40.7% of the Latino (largely Mexican-American) population did not graduate from high school, compared to 9.5% white students.

Valverde, an education researcher, argued that one of the reasons for the gap is the adverse psychological framework created by the lack of integration between the Mexican and American cultures in schools [12]. In many cases, English and mainstream American culture are imposed onto Mexican-American students, and the home culture is suppressed [12]. Changing these adverse conditions and attaining suitable integration of both cultures is a difficult process.

Some schools, like the one we studied, make a comprehensive effort to integrate elements of the



Figure 1: El Sol Academy campus

culture of the student into the American context, and at the same time to expose students to American aspirations such as going to college.

## 2.2 El Sol Academy

The Poetry Workshop took place at a K-8 charter school in Santa Ana, California. A charter school is a state funded school, freed from some regulations in order to produce certain results expressed in the schools charter [14]. Most El Sol students came from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background. The majority of students and staff were of Mexican-American origin, but other ethnic groups were also represented. Many students had Spanish as their mother tongue. Parents had to apply on behalf of their child to gain admittance to the school.

The El Sol Academy considered its mission to be to prepare students for college in order to create future leaders. Given the low representation of Mexican-American in universities, it was a very important and ambitious task.

Bilingualism and biliteracy were encouraged through a dual-language immersion program. El Sol used a “90/10” dual language program [15] where the use of English language increased throughout each grade. The model took the Spanish speaking children into English education smoothly and effectively.

## 2.3 Methods

We observed workshop sessions in third, fourth, and fifth grades. We visited El Sol during different times of the day and engaged in informal conversations with El Sol teachers and Poetry Academy staff, to gain contextual information on everyday activities.

To understand the motives behind the participants of the Poetry Academy, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews with the Poetry Academy staff and El Sol teachers. During these interviews, teachers and staff talked about their perception of the Poetry Academy as part of the students’ education and the value of using digital technologies in the Workshop.

We analyzed student’s paper folders and the online Writing Lab, a software system used to edit and publish a poetry journal on the Web. Each student had a folder with the handouts and worksheets completed in the Workshop. The facilitators provided us with eight folders, from students of mixed levels of writing ability, from two of the fourth grade classes. Through the online Writing Lab version history facility, we tracked the changes the students made to their drafts and published poems.

All of the names of students, teachers and Poetry Academy staff are pseudonyms.

## 2.4 Poetry Academy

The Poetry Academy program was founded by Sue Cronmiller in 2003. With a grant from the “University-Community Links” program. The Poetry Academy promoted poetry-based educational activities to empower individuals and communities through art and communication, using technology as a medium of expression. The projects were directed toward students in at-risk communities with low graduation rates and low rates of college admission.

## 2.5 The Workshop at El Sol

The Poetry Academy Workshop was held weekly in the same classrooms where the students received their regular instruction. The sessions lasted one hour. There were two types of sessions, one predominantly devoted to production of writing, and the other focused on revision.

In the production sessions, there were exercises to prompt students to write. These sessions started with an explanation of the exercise goals. Then, students received a paper handout. The handout’s visual layout and a “step by step” structure guided students to create poems in a limited period of time. Occasionally, students also worked on blank pieces of paper.

In the revision sessions, students transcribed their poems into the online Writing Lab system, and revised their work according to the comments of editors. The revision sessions were a joint effort of students and their editors to get poems to a publishable level. The best students’ poems were published in the quarterly literary journal *The Minds Eye*.

The Writing Lab was a modification of an off-the-shelf Content Management System. This system served to streamline the editorial process of *The Minds Eye*.

The Workshop was structured around the writing and revising process. The Workshop’s most tangible outcome was the literary journal. We will explain in following sections the implications and significance of the Workshop structure and its outcomes.

## 2.6 Roles and organization of the workshop

The Poetry Workshop staff was comprised of facilitators, aides, and online editors. Facilitators directed the workshop, prepared lessons, gave instructions to the students, and kept aides up to date. Aides worked with small groups of students (between two and four) to provide individual assistance, and assisted students to make their writing “good writing.” Aides also provided technical assistance to students using laptops. Editors commented the students’ poetry

using the online Writing Lab system, at different times of than the Workshop sessions.

However, the Poetry Academy staff roles were flexible. Once the initial instruction was over, facilitators provided individual help to students. Some of the facilitators and aides would also perform editorial work. The staff took different roles, allowing more interaction with students.

All of the facilitators were English graduate students. Aides and editors were undergraduate students, from diverse majors.

In the words of the founder of the Poetry Academy, *"This workshop takes a lot of people."* In a classroom of thirty students, there were up to twelve members of the Poetry Academy staff. Personal assistance was necessary to get the students through the Workshop. Many students needed considerable help with the writing process itself, and with the use of digital technology.

## 2.7 Motivations of the Poetry Academy

Different stakeholders of the Poetry Academy had different motivations. The multiplicity of motivations molded the spirit and concrete actions of the workshop. Activity Theory refers to this phenomenon as polymotivation [7].

The Poetry Academy intended to empower students by developing their creativity and writing. El Sol Academy wanted to prepare students for college.

The Workshop integrated these motivations into a single object of activity. While the most visible objective of the Poetry Academy was to teach creative writing, it was also seen by staff as an opportunity to expose students to the idea of going to college.

Students and teachers referred to staff of the Poetry Academy as "UCI" (University of California, Irvine), linking them directly with a university. The Poetry Academy staff that we interviewed saw in this exposure one of the most positive points of the program. One of the facilitators said:

*[The program is valuable for] a kid like Ric, [who, like] some other kids wouldn't tend to associate higher learning with fun. [Over the time] you can see that they become less shy and warmer to us. And that seems to be the case for many kids.*

Forming personal relationships between the Poetry Academy staff and the students could positively impact the perception that the students had of going to college. Many of the students came from families where few parents or relatives had the opportunity to receive higher education. For these students, El Sol was the primary place where they could socialize with people with university degrees.

## 2.8 Expected outcomes from the workshop

On a surface level, the object of activity of the Workshop was to write poetry. The online literary journal of students' poetry, published at the end of each quarter, was the crystallization of this effort.

However, after examining the various stakeholder motivations, we could see how this single object of activity had multiple meanings, and multiple outcomes.

The clearest outcome of the students' work was the production of poetry. Once the basic concepts of writing poetry were covered, students were asked to use those concepts to create their own poems. There was a constant encouragement to think hard and deeply, and to write those thoughts in "creative" and "original" ways. For instance, students were asked to work on specific aspects of their writing, such as avoiding clichés, or taking vivid images from their own life experiences, and incorporating them into their poems.

Equally important, was the motivation to increase students' self confidence as creators and as people who could pursue higher education. Unlike the written poetry, this outcome was not immediately visible, and would require time to emerge.

Based on these outcomes, there were cognitive and emotive components of learning in the workshops. The cognitive component was to empower the children with sophisticated English and its pairing with creativity. The emotive component was to give students the confidence as writers and to create role-models from the college students that worked as facilitators and aides.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 The revision process

Revision is key to create good writing. The constant opportunities for students to revise their work were intended to encourage them to develop the habit of revising. It was also hoped that students would experiment, without fear, with many kinds of writing. In revision session where students typed up a previously produced poem, a student said, *"My poem is horrible."* A nearby aide replied her, *"You can edit it,"* and explained to the student that writing is about revising and improving.

The Workshop was designed to facilitate the revision process. Staff's division of labor was designed to promote a continuous conversation between them and students, centered on the creation and revision of poems. This conversation was held in diverse communication modes.

### 3.2 Talking poetry

The first thing the facilitators did upon entering the classroom was to introduce the lesson of the day, standing in front of the class and giving verbal directions. The lessons were centered on verbal or visual content, with limited use of the whiteboard.

The performance of the facilitators and aides directly related to the motivation of creating an interpersonal relationship between the facilitators and children while teaching. Orality was used by the facilitators to transmit the content of the lessons but also the values of what “*good writing*” was. Having original thoughts and not copying others, avoiding clichés, and being specific in the descriptions, were some of the values transmitted to the students.

One of the lessons we observed focused on sounds. During this lesson facilitators gave their normal oral instructions, but also performed an act where they used various objects, concealed by a curtain, to produce uncommon noises out of common objects such as scissors, staplers, or pieces of wood. The students, prevented from seeing the objects producing the noises, were then asked to describe the sounds in non-conventional ways. The facilitators told the students that they should be “*trying to say how it sounds*,” not guessing what it was. Facilitators were pushing the poetic thinking of students; they did not want a “correct” answer. The facilitators said to the students: “*If you know what it is, you are being less creative.*”

To prompt the students, the facilitators began by reminding them of the concept of simile:

“*You [remember] a simile, give a simile of what you think it sounds like,*” they said. For one sound, a student said: “*It was salsa music!*” And the facilitator replied: “*Was it fast? That’s a really good idea.*”

The students wrote down their answers on a work sheet. Some were called to read their responses to the rest of the class.

This type of activity continued with the facilitators and aides using various objects to make sounds for the students to write about. The students had to constantly shift between oral, aural, and written modes.

The second part of the sound lesson was an exercise on identifying emotions. The facilitators took their spots at the front of the class and asked the children to give them names of different types of emotions. They then added an element of fun by turning it into a contest for who could come up with the best words. As the children shouted out their responses, they were written on the whiteboard:

“*Happy, Sad, Grouchy, Nervous, Tired, Thirsty, Wild, Helpless, Strong...*”

The facilitators provided affirmations to the students such as, “*Wow*” or “*You guys are really good at this.*”

The facilitators left the word list on the board while the students began to work on their handouts individually and in small groups with the aides. The words on the board provided indexes for the students’ writings. By writing the words on the board, the aides and facilitators could always return back to the language techniques by asking the students to add adjectives and verbs to their writing to make it more descriptive.

While the act of writing initially evokes thoughts of persistent conversation, in this case the use of an ephemeral medium, as well as the oratory exercise, provided the context for the written work. Alone, the written information would have been meaningless.

### 3.3 Writing paper poetry

When we asked one of the facilitators a reason for choosing paper over computer, his first reaction was, “*Well, there are not enough computers.*” Paper was the persistent mode most available to students.

Writing on paper was easier than typing for these students. When we questioned one of the facilitators on the hypothetical possibility of giving the handouts to the students in an electronic format, he responded:

“*I don’t know if it would be worth it. For many of them, it is the first time that they are typing, so if they had to write a poem on the computer, it would take all of their brain power just to type.*”

Paper handouts, used in the production sessions, provided scaffolding for the young writers. Many of these handouts had forms with semi-built sentences in which students could fill in the blanks. When we asked a facilitator the purpose of these semi-built sentences, he said that they removed “*the stress of building sentences.*” Students completed the form with nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Using the form, they could “*just jump in*” to create poetry.

Despite the structure of the handouts, students produced highly original writing. In an exercise with a handout to allow students to write a song with a structure similar to a medieval Nordic poem, one student, Richard, wrote, “*I am the paint of every art.*” Jaime, another student, wrote, “*I’m a black cat letting day come and go.*”

Handouts stimulated conversations. Facilitators' instructions were not only oral, but also printed in the handout. Students responded to the oral/printed instructions by writing on the handout. The persistent paper mode was woven in and out with the ephemeral oral mode, to reinforce the instructions.

Sometimes aides would make small pencil marks in the students' handouts. When we analyzed the student's folders, the traces of interactions between aides and students that we found were sparse and mainly spelling corrections. In Workshop observations we saw that aides used their fingers to point at the paper indicating the next part students had to fill in.

The traces of interaction that we consistently found in the paper files were of those interactions that the students had with themselves. Paper was used by the students as a "writing workbench."

As we can see in the original handwritten poem created by Bryan (Fig. 2), the left side of the page and part of the top right side were used to write "interesting words," as the one of the facilitators explained, to be incorporated in a poem. The students sometimes created "word banks"—lists of words to inspire their writing. Bryan's word bank was turned into a place to scribble the first version of a poem he later published. The words "cold," "water," "branches," and "train" in the top right of the page appear in the poem written below them. Bryan used the

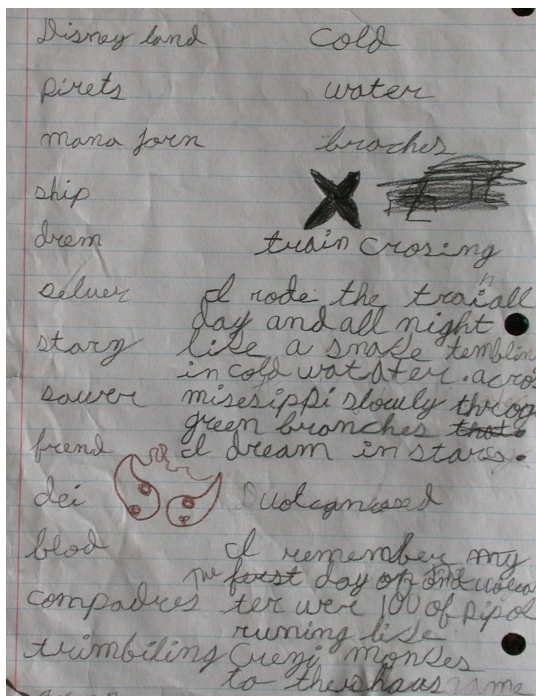


Figure 2: Original handwritten version of a poem created by Bryan.

visual reference to remember words he wanted to use in the poem.

These traces of Bryan's self conversation have little meaning for someone other than himself. The context needed to interpret these traces is not embodied in the piece of paper.

When Bryan's poem was rewritten in the computer, the traces of the persistent self conversation were left out (Fig. 3). This was also the case for the handouts, where the facilitators' printed instructions were no longer meaningful. Only the outcome of the activity—the poem—remained in the electronic medium.

The trace of Bryan's thought process and the printed instructions were not relevant for the later electronic conversation between editors and students. Leaving out those traces facilitated the new editorial conversation. The editors reviewed the poems outside workshop hours. Hence it was impossible for the editors to ask students' for clarifications if they did not understand a messy page, like that of Figure 2. However, the electronic system presented a neat and easy to read page, with no ambiguities or scribbled handwriting, facilitating the editor's work.

### 3.4 Rewriting computer poetry

The first step for publishing the students' poems using the Writing Lab was for them to copy the

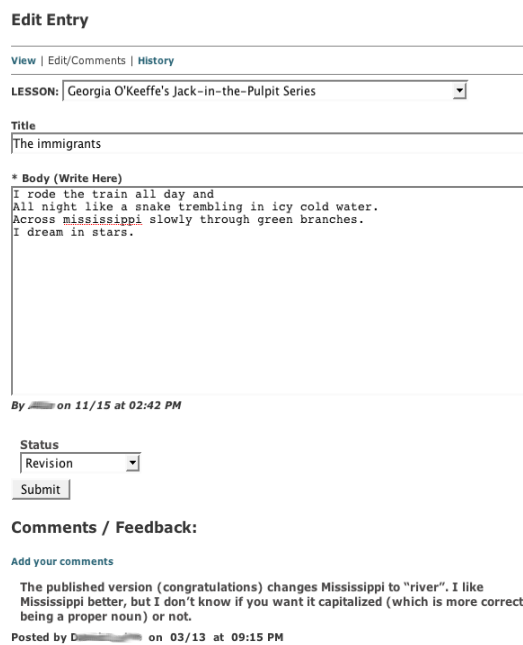


Figure 3: Transcribed version of Bryan's poem in Figure 2.

original handwritten poems. This step was taken as an opportunity to encourage revision.

The students did not work alone on revising their poems once they got the editorial comments. In revision sessions at the Workshop, facilitators gave students some initial instructions of the mechanics of the revision process. Immediately after aides would work closely with students, in groups of three or four.

With the help of the aides, students would type one or two of their poems per session. Once the poems were uploaded, the editors would comment on them online on a variety of issues, including presentation of ideas, tone, and pragmatic aspects of writing.

The editors' comments used sophisticated academic language. In general, the comments were comprised of an opening sentence about the strong and weak aspects of the poem, then a list of specific points to be worked on, and finally the editor's signature.

The aides' role was to help students decode the complex language of the comments, and to enable them focus on the corrections needed to make the poems publishable.

The conversation that aides and students had around the editors' comments was crucial for the realization of the revision process. Aides were essential to enable students to take the suggested actions on the editorial comments.

Many students were very interested in identifying the author of their comments and meeting them in person. This allowed students to give an interpersonal meaning to the critique of their work, in Halliday's sense. By meeting the person who edited their poems, they understood who was delivering the message. The academic language of the comments could be intimidating for some El Sol students. However, when the students saw the faces of the editors, they found a kind face, they relaxed, and did not feel intimidated by editors who were also themselves students.

The revision process depended on rich multimodal conversations in which ephemeral and persistent modes were interwoven. For example, Marta, a fifth grade student, received a comment from Sofia, an editor. Sofia was present in the room at the time Marta read the comment, but too busy to help Marta. Thomas, an aide, stepped in to interpret Sofia's comment. Sofia had written:

*Hey Marta!  
Great poem! I really love each line, but I am a bit confused by your third line. I like the idea of order and disorder (not "unordered"), so you should try to change that line up a bit and make it flow with the first two lines, as well as the last one. Nice!*  
Sophia

The third line of Marta's poem that Sophia referred to was:

*I think of unlock, order & unordered.*

To help Marta work out Sophia's comment, Thomas talked to Marta about the concept of order. Then, he tried to ground the concept back into the writing, and asked the student:

*Now what phrase would use it, what would be an ordered phrase?*

Marta gave examples of things that would demonstrate order. She came up with "keys." Marta rewrote the line as:

*I think of keys, organized & unorganized.*

Thomas pushed Marta to make the line more specific, more accessible to the reader and in synchrony with the flow of poem. Marta rewrote:

*I think of keys scratching each other, organized & unorganized.*

In Marta's revision we see how the electronic and face-to-face modes merged into a single conversation to enhance her writing. Sophia, using an electronic mode, first pointed out to Marta the need for making more clarity in the images in her poem. However, the electronic message alone was difficult for Marta to interpret. Thomas helped Marta develop an understanding, adding clarity to what her poem meant. The ephemeral, oral, conversation with Thomas enabled Marta to act upon Sophia's electronic comment.

This conversation is an example of how the combination of the ephemeral and persistent modes enabled students to respond to the editors' reviews. For Marta, the conversation allowed her to find a vivid image to add life and clarity to her poem.

### **3.5 The seriousness of writing**

During the interviews with teachers and staff of the Poetry Academy, we questioned them about the value of using digital technologies in the Workshop. We received a diverse but consistent set of responses.

First, the exposure to the technology was seen as positive. Ally, an aide, responded:

*They are learning how to type, how to use a Web browser, log on to a Website. Those are life skills that they will need when they go to high school or college.*

A similar perception was shared by many of the facilitators and the two teachers we interviewed. The value of using technology was seen as a necessary skill to let students continue their higher education.

While transporting the cart with the laptops for the workshop from one classroom to the next one, an aide remarked: “Well, there are a lot of problems with the Website.” We asked if, despite these problems, he saw a value in using technology. He answered, “Well, I think so, because they get to type their poems, and get comments from the editors.”

The computer system was perceived to improve the work of the editors and the students’ conversations. Harris, a facilitator, pointed out:

*It streamlines the process for them to get their work edited. It feels more official to them, I think, because it is really being published on the Web.*

Harris linked the editing process with imbuing the writing with an official aura and a sense of seriousness.

The “seriousness of writing” theme constantly recurred in the interviews. All of the facilitators agreed that the students perceived their poems in a different way once they were typed into the computer. This seriousness was a combination of factors. The students were not used to producing typed text. For many, copying their poems into the online system was one of their first times typing. They were seeing their poems in different way, literally.

However the “seriousness” was also created by the social construction around the online system. Facilitators repeatedly stressed that texts to be uploaded should be publishable. The emphasis was on making the students understand that the poems should be “as good as they can be,” as the facilitators said, when uploaded to the system.

The visual impact of the visually polished poetry publication produced by the students and staff using the Writing Lab system, along with the comments from the editors expressed in an academic register, contributed to the construction of this sense of seriousness. Although the facilitators observed that it was likely that students did not fully understand the implications of publishing, the students knew that their work was something important and valued.

#### 4. Discussion

Following Bakhtin [1, 16], we should consider “any written discourse [as] an unfinished social dialogue.” We found that the production of writing at the Poetry Academy was visibly a dialogical act, where facilitators, editors, aides, and students engaged in a conversation that ultimately enabled the students to create poetry. The constant process of revision of the students’ writing engaged all of the Poetry Academy participants in this dialogue.

Using different modes, the act of writing poetry at the Workshop was able to convey multiple meanings. From the staff point of view, these meanings included empowering the children with English and creativity, exposing them to digital literacy, and ultimately, preparing them to pursue higher education. On the students’ side, although they did not fully understand concepts such as a “publishable poem,” they grasped the seriousness with which adults treated the poems they wrote, and felt that their work could be appreciated by the adults around them.

Through rich multimodal conversations with the Poetry Academy staff, all of them studying at UCI, the El Sol students stepped closer to the unfamiliar world of the university. We could observe how the students perceived this university world as something positive. An affectionate relationship was developed between El Sol students and “UC.”

The world of the university was exposed for students whose background did not provide such exposure, and in a positive way through congenial personal relationships. Ephemeral modes were used by the Poetry Academy staff to transmit an interpersonal meaning to the activity of writing poetry. Bonding between the students and the Poetry Academy staff was a way to show students that “*University people are nice,*” as one of the facilitators said.

During the initial instruction given by the facilitators in the oral mode, the whiteboard was used marginally to capture students’ responses during the sound association exercise. Making an argument from a simple notion of affordances, we could say that the use of the whiteboard changed the oral mode from an ephemeral to a persistent mode. Obviously marks persist on a whiteboard; its “material qualities of the medium of delivery,” as Berglund defined a mode, would seem to be clearly persistent.

However, we see the opposite in the context of the Poetry Academy where, *in practice*, the whiteboard was an ephemeral mode. Inscriptions were quickly erased and used marginally as support for the oral mode. The whiteboard acted as a prop in a performance to create an interpersonal relationship between the facilitators and children. A stroke of the eraser, and all the written words were gone. None of the participants of the Poetry Academy was surprised with this move, as it was expected that at any moment the whiteboard would be erased.

As with the whiteboard, the terms of the persistency of textual electronic modes are also to be reconsidered. Word processors afford changing text, but these changes do not leave any visible traces after they are made. If one deletes a word with the backspace key, there will be no sign of it afterwards. If someone else changes our writing on a document,



we cannot tell who it was (unless we use specialized software features like “track changes” of MS Word.) However, studies of keystroke logging are starting to understand what kind of information can be extracted from the writers’ keying process (see [20] for an overview).

Churchill and Nelson [17] defined a persistent conversation as one that “occurs through a medium whereby the conversational acts or utterances are recorded.” On this view, a spoken conversation is equated to an ephemeral conversation, where content is lost and it cannot be retrieved. This distinction, however, is silent about the temporal nature of the conversation. If we take into consideration temporality, the whiteboard can be seen as an ephemeral mode. The messages it records do not last significantly longer than the words of a conversation in the hearer’s consciousness.

With Bolter’s [18] insights we understand how a persistent act needs to be recorded. But some recording media are more fixed than others. The whiteboard is an erasable, temporary writing surface that positions itself in an in-between status. When coupled with the oral mode, the whiteboard served as an ephemeral medium to help gain the attention of the students in the moment. Paper on the other hand, was used to give persistence to the students’ thought processes. The handouts helped students follow the exercises of the production sessions and retained them for later copying.

We argue that the “fixity” of the media that Bolter speaks of is a mixture of physical affordances and cultural conventions. In the context of the Poetry Academy, the whiteboard is mostly seen as ephemeral. But we can easily think of places where the whiteboard is more of a persistent medium. For instance, in some cafeterias, menus are written in whiteboards (or blackboards) in a place where all the clientele can see them. In this context, the content of the boards does not change very often (unless they have an overly creative chef), and is not appropriate for the passers by to wipe them out.

In this example the same medium would be treated differently than in the Poetry Academy, and constituted as persistent mode of communication. This consistency would be due to the cultural conventions in that context, and not solely to the inherent material qualities of the board.

Warschauer [19] conducted extensive research in elementary and middle schools that provide one laptop computer per student. He found that teachers gave more thoughtful revision to student work produced in electronic formats. Typed texts were easier to read than handwriting, and electronic files were easier to manage than paper.

However, a notion of “easier” presupposes specific social and cultural conditions: the availability of functioning computers, contemporary handwriting, which is less artistic and pleasing than the beautiful script of a hundred years ago, and a high level of computer literacy on the part of the teachers.

In the Poetry Workshop, we encountered a similar situation, where editors were able to provide high quality comments on the writing of up to twenty students. Like Warschauer’s teachers, they also perceived the task to be “easier” than working with paper.

The use of the online system was only partially explained by the perceived conveniences. As an aide pointed out, the Writing Lab was actually quite glitchy. Many technical difficulties, sometimes out of the reach of the Poetry Academy staff, made the Writing Lab system operation difficult.

Although it would have been possible for the editors to give their comments to the students orally or on paper, certain aspects of the meaning would not have been transmitted in some situations. The power of the electronic mode was fundamentally grounded in its status as a technology that reinforced students’ perception of their writing as a “serious” matter.

The editors’ use of academic language in their comments also added to the seriousness of students’ work. Using Halliday’s notion of the functions of signs [8], we see that the ideational function of the comments was the concrete actions to be taken by the students. The comments had a significant textual function because by using academic language, the students’ poems were signaled as worthy of the “academic world,” however vague that concept was to the students. The comments framed the students’ poetry as valuable pieces of literature worthy of scholarly analysis.

This same textual function was also constructed by the use of the Writing Lab. The use of digital technology in the day to day classes was rare. Having a Web application for managing the students’ writing signaled to the participants of the Poetry Academy that their work was important enough to bring a digital technology into the classroom. When students rewrote their poems into the computer, they were able to see the poems differently. Their poems were now a public matter, something that had a typeface, just as the books they read.

The creation of the “seriousness” of the students writing was a combination of the impression students had seeing poems in a type-faced form, and the emphasis that facilitators put on uploading poems only when they were ready for publication. The seriousness was a combination of the material qualities of the mode, historical conditions, and the social

construction around use of the technology. This situation was socially and culturally inflected, not reducible to the simple material affordances of the Writing Lab.

## 5. Conclusions

In understanding the role of technology within the Poetry Academy writing workshop, we questioned whether the comments and edits provided by the facilitators, aides, and online editors constituted a form of conversation with the children. This led us to consider the use of different modes to assemble the conversation in the Poetry Academy Workshop. Ultimately, we found that both the persistent and the ephemeral modes of conversation were essential to create and maintain a conversation directed towards enabling students to write poetry.

Future research should investigate various modes of conversation that exist together and separately within an environment supported by technology. We have found that multimodal conversations are essential to sustaining a persistent conversation across multiple pieces of technology. Our analysis focused on an educational setting, but we believe this framework could be applied to other settings as well. A thoughtful understanding of persistent conversations will only be possible if they are framed in ways that reveal how the socio-technical context makes them meaningful.

## 6. Acknowledgements

We thank Nicholas Mangano for his insights in the social practices around whiteboards.

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