An Email to My Mom

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Pull Quote:

Subject: my first class,

Hey Mom,

At the time of this email, my first class of college had just ended. I woke up a little later than I wanted to for my 9 a.m. class, as in fifteen minutes before the class started. I shot out of bed, quickly brushed my teeth, hopped on my bike, and rushed to the class. I got to the classroom door and opened it with a little wobble in my step. The class was smaller than most lower division classes, about thirty kids. All of us were English majors, most trying to become teachers in a classroom. I wouldn't be opposed to that, but I am still trying to keep my options a little open. I walked and picked a seat right in the middle of the classroom. I was very nervous. What would they think of me? Would they think I'm weird? Is my outfit fine? Am I sweating too much?

I wasn't used to being around so many kids that are so smart. I was used to being one of the top kids in my class, now I might be in the middle or maybe even closer to the bottom. I got a little mad when 9 a.m. hit, and the professor wasn't even there. So much for worrying about being late! Eventually, the professor walked in. He was tall and as bald as Homer Simpson. "Good morning!" he said. "It is the first day of class. Unlike high school, we are going to get right into it. I am going to give you four articles that I want you to read. Use them to answer this question: Do digital tools genuinely promote equitable literacy practices, or does it risk becoming another ineffective educational trend? Read the articles, then pick a side of the classroom. One side will be pro, and the author will be negative. You have one hour."

The assigned readings were Price-Dennis et al. (2015), West-Puckett (2016), Barone & Wright (2008), and Rex et al. (2010). These academic articles were difficult to read. Why do scholars write this way? Perhaps my next class would shed some light on that.

I have always found academic writing to be intentionally complex because it is written for experts in the field. Scholars use specialized terminology, detailed methodologies, and extensive citations to build their arguments. In other words, they suck at making stuff brief. After reading everything, I got a brief stance of what each author's argument is: West-Pucket argues that

traditional classroom writing assessments are restrictive and advocates for digital badging. Price Dennis highlights how digital tools enable all students to participate in literacy learning. Barone, Diane, and Todd E. Wright talk about how this pushes educators beyond traditional methods and that many teachers lack training, resources, and modern assessments. Finally, Rex, Lesley A. talks about how literate identities are constructed, whose literacy practices are valued, and how schools can support students in developing literacy. Rex, Lesley A. findings suggest that literacy education must evolve to reflect technological shifts (p109).

After reading, I knew I had two tasks to do to argue this the best I could: Analyze which authors can be used for the pro and con arguments and define all the vocabulary. Let's start with the vocabulary. What do they mean by digital badging and digital tools? Digital badging is a system where virtual emblems, or "badges," are used to recognize and showcase skills. This is different from digital assessment, which is more about evaluating one's skills. You can use digital badging as one aspect of digital assessment. Digital badging is simply one digital tool the same way a wrench is different from a screwdriver. When you think of other digital tools, think of tools such as learning management systems, automated grading, gamified learning tools, and more, and more, and more. When it came to pinning the authors to a pro and con side, I would say that isn't possible. To be honest, Mom, every author could have been used for the pro or con argument. The authors show both pros and cons. When it comes to the pros, West-Pucket argue that digital badging is faster and more transparent, Price-Dennis argue that digital tools allow students to engage with literacy on a deeper level, Barone and Wright argue these tools increase students engagement in the classroom, and Rex argues that these tools are changing how kids learn reading and writing (not a pro but more of an observation that could be used for a pro argument). On the flip side, every author echoes their concerns. Barone and Wright are concerned with the infrastructure in place to use these tools, Rex highlights the unequal access to technology, West-Pucket warns about the fetishizing of digital tools, and Price-Dennis cautions against replacing foundational literacy practices. Overall, each author could've been used for each side, the question was, which one will my classmates choose?

I chose the pro side because I found it easier to argue for the benefits of technology. Despite the issues with digital tools, I couldn't deny that they had revolutionized everything you could think of. I could order food through DoorDash and have it at my door in thirty minutes or go on Instagram and instantly see what all my friends, airpods, computers, etc… If they could do all of that why can't Still, parsing through the academic articles was tough, so I apologize if I misread meanings. Again, why is academic writing so dense, and is there a class for it?

Once the reading session ended, we had about twenty minutes to debate, which was not nearly enough time. Our side argued that digital assessment offers personalized learning and real-time feedback, improving students who struggle with outdated assessment methods, which could in turn revolutionize not just literacy but also the school system as a whole. The counter argued that

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digital assessments assume equal access to technology which. This counterargument eventually got a little twisted by the professor who offered his interesting take…

Ethan, a tall guy in a hoodie that read "Sex Wax," probably a surfer from Huntington Beach, brought up a key argument: personalization. He stated, "Traditional assessment assumes a one-size-fits-all approach. Digital tools can adapt to specific needs, allowing students to avoid rigid frameworks that don't serve them well." His argument aligned with Price-Dennis et al. (2015), who emphasizes that digital literacy fosters inclusivity by enabling students to engage in multimodal learning experiences. The Hive Society classroom case study illustrates how digital storytelling and collaborative online spaces can support diverse learners (Price-Dennis et al., 2015, p. 198).

Building on Ethan's point, I added that digital assessments make tests more engaging. "They can present information in interactive ways, even through gamification." The argument was well received, which made me incredibly happy 🙂. Can you believe it, Mom? On my first day, I was able to build something into my class discussion. How awesome is that? My claim resonated with Barone and Wright's (2008) discussion of digital media in literacy instruction, which suggests that digital tools can foster higher student engagement when implemented effectively (Barone & Wright, 2008, p. 295). Price-Dennis et al. (2015) further support this by demonstrating how digital tools help students exceed the expectations placed on them by districts (p. 201).

This is what the whole success of digital assessments depends upon: the ability to personalize learning. It is the whole idea that technology can improve an outdated system that needs improving. An excellent example of this is Kahoot! In middle school, whenever my teacher used it, I had a good time. Why? Because it was more engaging and interactive! This doesn't mean that we need to all start using Kahoot for finals, but tools like gamification and digital badging could 1,000 percent improve the engagement literacy.

A girl named Sofia then stood up. She was tall, way taller than me, which for some reason bothered me more than it should. She then introduced another benefit: real-time feedback. "Traditional assessments make students wait too long for their grades," she argued. "Immediate feedback allows students to correct misunderstandings right away, and teachers also save time on grading." Her argument reminded me of my fourth-grade frustrations—waiting weeks for a grade, only to be disappointed by a "B." Sofia's point was supported by West-Puckett (2016), who critiques conventional writing assessments for being slow and opaque. She talks about advocates for digital badging as an alternative that increases assessment transparency and provides immediate recognition of student progress (West-Puckett, 2016, p. 136). This method not only speeds up grading but also makes student progress more visible and portable across different learning contexts. In turn, students can learn quicker and more effectively. This is another reason why these tools can be helpful beyond just making school more interactive.

This point made a lot of sense to me. I am not that old, but I remember when everybody graded by hand. It would take weeks before I would get my grades back. My first encounter with automatic grading was in AP Human Geography when, after my test, I scanned it and got my score back instantly. It was absolute magic. Imagine what this could do at scale.

Then, the con side took their turn, and boy, was I not ready for it.

Another student stood up. He was short and stocky with brown hair. His name was mentioned, but I completely forgot it. He offered a counterargument that I would say is pretty valid. "Digital assessments assume that all students have equal access to technology," she pointed out. "What about underfunded schools? Without proper infrastructure, digital assessment could widen the gap between wealthy and disadvantaged students." Her argument echoed concerns from Rex et al. (2010), who highlight how literacy practices are shaped by social inequities. They emphasize that, while digital tools can enhance literacy, they may also reinforce existing disparities if not implemented equitably (Rex et al., 2010, p. 105). This critique was compelling because it raised questions about whether digital assessments truly serve all students or simply provide an advantage to those with reliable internet and better resources.

As you know, Mom, I grew up in Fresno; this was very evident. We may have been blessed and lived in very nice areas, while others were not. The high school that you sent me to had poverty that broke my soul. Kids who just felt like they had no hope, no way of getting out, stuck in a food desert. These kids had such a disadvantage when it came not just to literacy education but education education. The lack of infrastructure could only make our hometown school system even worse. Imagine while you are playing Kahoot in a class full of smiling students that there is another classroom in a poorly lit room with a bunch of kids who can barely afford a backpack. Sure, there are ways to foster learning without tech, but tech is just simply better. How can a kid with a paper and pencil compete with an iPad?

At that moment, the professor, who had been rather silent up until this point, stepped in with a question that I thought was quite challenging: "Does digital assessment actually encourage deeper literacy engagement, or does it just create passive test-takers who don't take the next step in having their literacy advanced?" The room erupted. Friendships were broken and made. Chaos was the only thing that ensued. Everyone started shouting their points. It reminded me of how wars must start—with one explosive moment leading to chaos. Amid the commotion, I picked up on a key criticism: digital assessments often rely on multiple-choice questions, which aren't always effective for deep learning. If students are merely clicking through answers without formulating written responses, are they genuinely learning? I then recalled an experience from my past in the classroom doing a digital assessment for English. It was interactive, interesting, and fun, but the multiple-choice format was not the strongest in encouraging a deeper literacy engagement. This point can be seen by West-Puckett (2016), who warns against fetishizing digital assessment tools over meaningful engagement, cautioning that assessment should be

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student-centered rather than driven by institutional convenience (West-Puckett, 2016, p. 134). Similarly, Barone and Wright (2008) argue that technology alone does not improve learning; it must be integrated thoughtfully into pedagogy (the method and practice of teaching) (p. 297).

Another concern was that digital assessment could reduce the emphasis on writing skills. If students primarily engage with automated grading systems, they may miss out on the critical thinking and writing development that traditional assessments encourage. Price-Dennis et al. (2015) highlight that while digital platforms offer advantages, they should not replace foundational literacy practices that require in-depth analysis and structured writing (p. 203).

As the debate raged on, I felt torn. Initially, I had been firmly pro-digital assessment, but now I see the nuances. Sure, technology can enhance accessibility and feedback, but if schools lack the necessary resources, is digital assessment truly equitable? Do they truly help the nuances of deep learning? I, like most kids, have been frustrated with how literacy was taught. Think about it like this: if you have been going to school for 12 years, why is it that you remember so little of it? As you know, growing up, I always thought that the learning system could be altered to learn more effectively. If digital tools prioritize efficiency over deep engagement, do they help students learn?

Reflecting on this discussion, I realized that digital tools' effectiveness is like many issues in life: complicated. In the society that we live in, there are no solutions, only trade-offs. Digital assessment has the potential to create equitable learning environments, but it must be accompanied by teacher training and proper infrastructure. Without strategic planning, digital tools can become ineffective or even detrimental. Digital assessments' ability to not replicate traditional inequities but instead foster genuine learning is still a topic that is up for much discussion. If it isn't, why does every author have both pro and con arguments in their articles?

By the time the chaos subsided, the debate remained unresolved. However, I realized that maybe that was the point of college: to think critically rather than just regurgitate facts. Welcome to higher education, I guess.

Talk soon,

Rowan

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