

# “But in the end, you are all beautiful”: Exploring Gender through Digital Composition

*The authors examine photovoice projects created by students and teacher candidates who explored issues of gender in response to a young adult novel and co-researched that process.*

W

hen we invited a group of grade 8 students and teacher candidates to read *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills), a novel about a youth named Gabe who is transgender, and use it as a springboard for their own inquiries into gender, change, and transition, we expected certain things to happen. We expected, for example, that words such as *transgender*<sup>1</sup> and *queer* would become part of the vernacular in Sarah’s classroom. We expected that students would raise and explore challenging questions about identity, power, and privilege. We expected that this work would be messy.

The students likely had expectations, too. Often when gender diversity and gender transition are explored in classrooms, the issues raised follow a familiar script, one that positions trans people as inherently “at risk” (Airton). Reflecting on the months-long inquiry process that produced the student work featured in this article, however, one student, Vince, told us, “I thought I’d relearn what I already know. But I learned something that I truly didn’t know. And that’s really important to me.” Indeed, what we did not expect is just how widely and deeply students would take up questions related to change and identity, and how powerful the ways they chose to express their inquiries would be.

In this article, we examine the pedagogical, technological, and relational structures that opened us to learning something we “truly didn’t know.” We focus in particular on one of the products of our inquiry process: photovoice projects that students created using poetry, images, and sound. Whereas *Beautiful Music* is a teen problem novel structured

around a binary approach to gender transition, photovoice projects allowed students to express their evolving understandings of their own and others’ gendered identities in nuanced and subtle ways. We begin with an overview of the overall project and our conceptual frameworks before looking closely at three examples of students’ projects. Finally, we read across the projects to suggest implications for digital composition and critical literacy in classrooms.

## Youth and Teachers as Co-learners and Co-researchers

The photovoice projects we feature here emerged from an ongoing initiative between the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE) and Delta Senior Alternative School, an ethnically diverse middle school in downtown Toronto. This collaboration invites adolescents and educators to design arts-based, critical literacy curriculum and co-research that process (Simon et al.). Over five years, the Addressing Injustices project will involve 150 students and 100 teacher candidates as partners in co-creating curriculum for five young adult (YA) novels. Each year, the research team, led by Rob, selects novels such as *Beautiful Music* that we hope will inspire students to share, expand, and challenge their own ideas about identity, culture, and power.

Participating teachers and youth were partners in the research process, which was conducted in classrooms and communities where they intend to effect change. This process involved critical practitioner research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle)

and participatory action research (Cammarota and Fine), informed by teachers’ and students’ histories and experiences of societal inequities. As co-researchers, we asked all participants (including ourselves) to consider what potential impact there might be in consciously—vulnerably—including knowledge from our own lives in photovoice projects that explore group experience—what Yatta Kanu and Mark Glor describe as “collaborative autobiography.” Kanu and Glor suggest that emotionally engaged story-sharing of this kind allows educators (and, we would add, youth) to participate in “a community that values self-understanding, but acts towards a future that is collective” (112).

Our research team facilitated nine workshops with 17 teacher candidates and 30 grade 8 students (see Figure 1). We began our inquiries by asking participants to consider times in their lives when an experience of change altered how they think about themselves in relation to other people and the world around them. Activities included

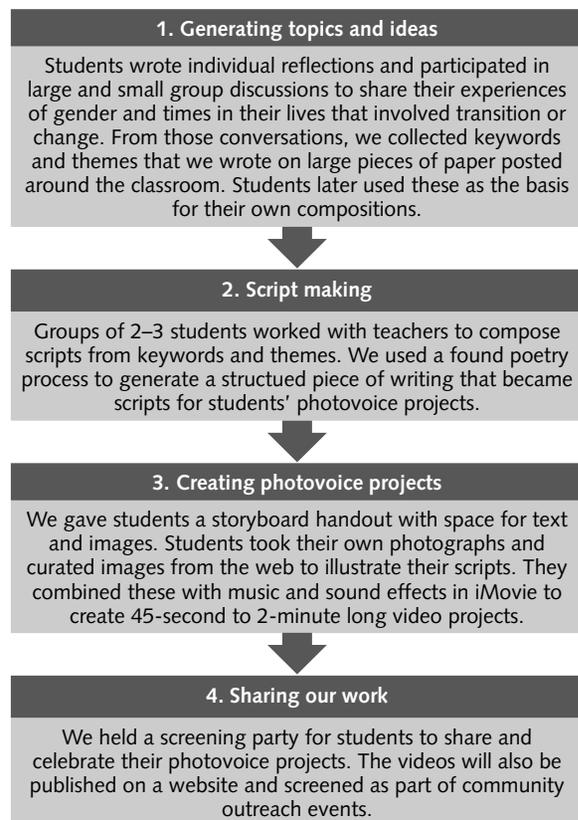
large-group discussions and individual written reflections that supported a poetry workshop where 15 teams of one to two teacher candidates and two to three middle school students worked together to collaboratively generate words that they turned into poetry, exploring their thoughts about identity, transition, and change. These poems became scripts for photovoice projects. We did not provide specific direction about what topics each project should include. Rather, we invited participants to explore social issues or instances in their own lives that connected to the broader theme of change.

### Students as Authors and Makers

Researchers have explored how students’ composition practices have been affected by digital literacy (Vasudevan et al.). Noting that “students need more than words to learn,” Marjorie Siegel has argued for teaching composition multimodally, noting that what she calls “transmediation,” the act of translating meanings from one sign system to another, increases students’ opportunities to engage in generative and reflective thinking (455). Many educators have turned to digital composition to address social justice issues and encourage critical solidarity (Jocson), including using podcasting (Hurst) or documentary video (Jocius) as a means of engaging students with concerns in their communities or as part of a research process (Doerr-Stevens). Following Hilary Janks, we regard digital composition as a form of design that, along with an emphasis on access, diversity, and an exploration of power relationships, is an aspect of critical literacy. Digital composition is a means for students to investigate questions they raise themselves and engage in a form of critical (re)writing (Freire).

The student projects we discuss in this article are adaptations of photovoice (see Figure 2), a digital composition practice that has been used to help individuals document and communicate their understandings of issues facing their communities. Developed by public health researchers as a participatory research method in health policy advocacy and community change efforts (Wang), photovoice has been taken up by literacy researchers to invite students to develop and share their insights into social issues (Zenkov et al.). While photovoice projects traditionally emphasize the importance

**FIGURE 1.** Teaching Strategy: Photovoice Project Composition Process



**FIGURE 2.** A List of Selected Resources Related to Photovoice and Digital Composition

Selected Resources
<p>A Practical Guide to Photovoice: Sharing Pictures, Telling Stories and Changing Communities  <a href="http://www.pwhce.ca/photovoice/pdf/Photovoice_Manual.pdf/">www.pwhce.ca/photovoice/pdf/Photovoice_Manual.pdf/</a>                      A resource guide for using photovoice as a method in participatory action research.</p>
<p>Creative Narrations  <a href="http://www.creativenarrations.net/">www.creativenarrations.net/</a>                      A website with examples of photovoice and digital story projects exploring community development and social change.</p>
<p>Empowering the Spirit Photovoice Project  <a href="http://empoweringthespirit.ca/wellness/photovoice-project/">empoweringthespirit.ca/wellness/photovoice-project/</a>                      A website with photovoice projects exploring the health and well-being of First Nations and Indigenous communities, including examples of a form of photovoice that involves narrative descriptions of still images.</p>
<p>PhotoVoice.org  <a href="http://www.photovoice.org/">www.photovoice.org/</a>                      A London-based organization that promotes photovoice as a form of community outreach and advocacy.</p>
<p>StoryCenter  <a href="http://www.storycenter.org/stories/">www.storycenter.org/stories/</a>                      An organization that supports individuals and local, community-based programs to share stories through digital media composition and digital storytelling.</p>

of photo documentation, the student projects we share include images that students took themselves as well as images found online. Both found images and their own photographs were curated and used to support ideas students explored through the collaborative poetry/script-making process described previously. We have come to think of the students' photovoice projects as a kind of "literacy performance" (Blackburn), which has "the potential to both reinforce and destabilize the values constructed through reading and writing" (313).

### **Making *Beautiful Music* with Words, Images, and Sounds**

*Beautiful Music* is a teen problem novel structured around a binary approach to gender transition, the story of one teenager's changing understanding of

and relationship with his own identity. Gabe is an individual who is learning to understand himself as transgender—as "in transition" (hicks)—but he is also a person with family connections, friendships, and community. As such, the distinctly queer content of the story also offered an opening for us to talk together about the many ways that human relationships can shift in reaction to change.

As the following three examples demonstrate, students drew upon a range of poetic and narrative techniques in their projects. Their diversity of creative choices is in keeping with the emphasis on change, multiplicity, queerness, and the unexpected. It also expresses the educational and literary possibilities of photovoice as a critical composition practice.

#### **The Circuit**

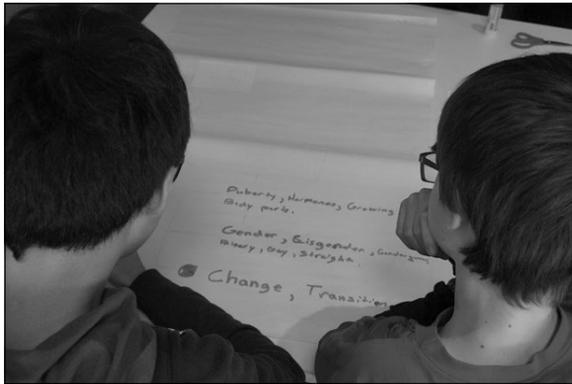
We were drawn to "The Circuit" in part because it provides an example of how photovoice writing invites students to explore the relationship of structure and content. Encouraging students to compose with images and sound helped them move from critical readings of a text exploring gender transition toward critically rewriting the world from their perspectives (Freire).

Unlike some student projects that used more linear narrative structures or poetic forms, Michael and Matthew imagined their project as a circular circuit, linking terms and ideas they found meaningful to their understanding of gender diversity and gender transition and their own process of growth and change. The choice of a circuit design for their project was little surprise to their peers in Sarah's class. As we came to learn about Michael and Matthew over several months, they shared an interest in programming that inspired their photovoice video as well as their final curriculum project, which involved rewriting *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* as an online, speculative, choose-your-own-adventure role-playing game.

From the outset Michael and Matthew had a clear vision for their project. Their initial storyboard

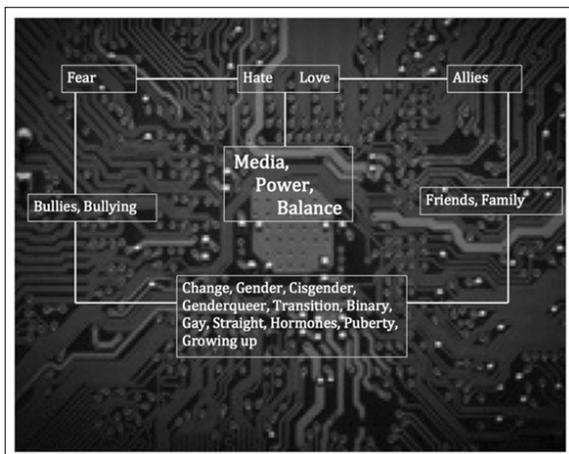
**Students drew upon a range of poetic and narrative techniques in their projects. Their diversity of creative choices is in keeping with the emphasis on change, multiplicity, queerness, and the unexpected.**

**FIGURE 3.** Michael and Matthew Collaborate on a Plan for Their Photovoice Project



(see Figure 3), completed shoulder to shoulder over several days as participating teachers looked on offering only occasional support, mirrored their final product (see Figure 4). They structured their video like a Prezi presentation, moving in and across detailed explorations of sections of their “circuit” map of observations, definitions, and the feelings they had about gender, represented as a network of interlinked words in boxes. Michael and Matthew begin their photovoice project reciting terms they encountered over the course of our inquiry. Words about transformation such as *change* and *transition* are juxtaposed with words related to identity, including some that disrupt binary ways of thinking of gender such as *genderqueer*. Collectively these

**FIGURE 4.** Screenshot from “The Circuit,” Michael and Matthew’s Completed Photovoice Project



words express Matthew and Michael’s insights into “growing up” gendered.

Michael and Matthew strategically placed the word *power* at the center of their map, conjoined with the words *media* and *balance*, emphasizing how media influences individuals’ beliefs about gender and identity. Surrounding these central ideas are terms such as *bully* and *family* that describe negative and positive forces that push and pull at individuals, delineated by the binary *bate* and *love*. The words represent how fear or bullying, ostensibly directed toward queer and/or trans people, can be counteracted by love, recognition, and support that are preconditions for gender equity. For each term, the students provide definitions, sometimes accompanied by images, that explore the crucial roles of allies, friends, and family. Taken together, the words, the ideas they express, and the unifying visual of a circuit board that links them suggest the power of language in shaping identity, our understandings of gender and of who we are as individuals, and how the choices we make can provide positive change in the social experiences of transgender youth.

In an interview, Matthew and Michael described what they felt in the process of working together on this project:

**Matthew:** Kind of like a surge of energy, basically, going through your head and then like busting out. It’s hard to describe, basically. It’s complicated. Yeah.

**Michael:** Kind of the same thing. All thoughts running through your head, trying to comprehend what’s going on.

When asked to share one word that described their experience, Matthew replied, “Emotional, I would say.” Michael said, “Life-changing. Yeah, life-changing.”

### What Is the Correct Suit?

Like Matthew and Michael, Abigail and Vince used their photovoice project as a way to explore issues of change and raise questions about what counts as “normal” from their perspectives. While Matthew and Michael chose the circuit as a framework for their inquiry, Abigail and Vince explored change through clothing metaphors.

The standout features of their photovoice project are its polyvocal delivery and the careful use of humor to undercut, resist, and complicate the words being spoken. The piece opens with Abigail, Vince, and Lance, the teacher candidate working with them, saying at the same time, “What is the correct suit?” over a still from the movie *Anchor-man*. Already the viewer is asked to consider the concept of both suits and correctness in light of the absurdity of the Will Ferrell universe. This cuts to a woman choosing a business suit from a rack with the voiceover “a variety of decisions, and challenging our assumptions,” and then an apple and an orange facing each other with the caption “well, we’re both fruit”—a clever rhyme with “suit” that also works to undercut the unstated gender binary of the previous two images (see Figure 5).

Vince and Abigail pair the statement “change is ever changing” with a photo of vibrant running shoes lined up according to size, followed by a laughing-crying sun, modelled on an emoji, with the words “colourful humour adds hope and freedom.” This occurs roughly in the middle of the digital story and in many ways serves as a key to the group’s approach. By tackling binaries primarily

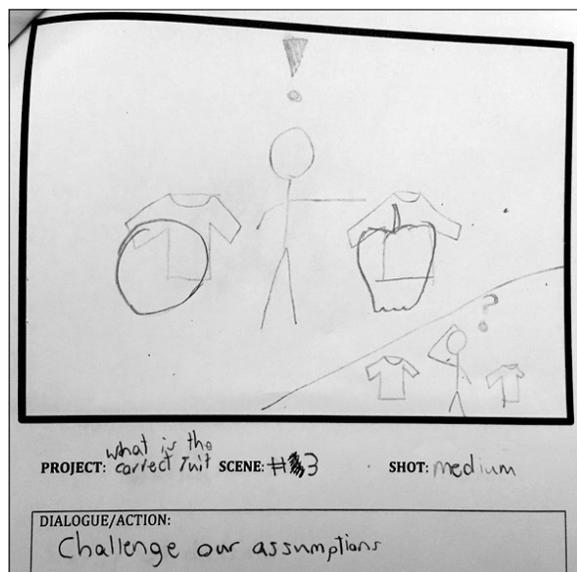
through humor, they undo the restrictions built into either/or situations (like suits, fruits, and normative gender), while enacting the escape that hope and humor provide.

The second half of the video pairs a photo of a confused-looking Nicolas Cage with the question “What is normal?” followed by a girl running away over the particularly poetic phrase “fugitive normal.” The video concludes with the observation that “labels and stereotypes limit our ability to run.” This speaks to the image of the girl running, a fugitive from the label of “normal,” but it also gestures back to the image of ever-changing running shoes. Abigail and Vince explore the possibilities of rhyme between visual and linguistic elements, expanding the capacities of poetry in the digital genre. In the final seconds of the story, one by one each group member says “why do”/ “we need”/ “a label” before coming together as a chorus to recite “at all,” over a multicolored question mark (see Figure 6).

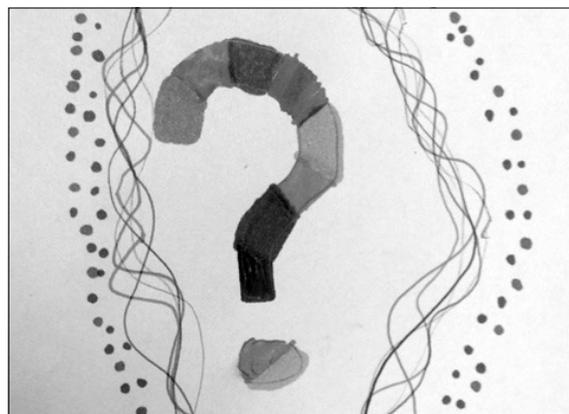
Vince and Abigail return to the polyvocal opening question, “What is the correct suit?” but their answer to this question is given in the form of another collective question. Answering a question with a question is a potent form of refusal, and it is also emblematic of the sly humor that runs through their video.

Importantly, there are no explicit references to trans or gender diverse stories in this photovoice project. A surface response to this piece, particularly because of its joking tone, might see the students as somehow not caring about the topic or assignment, or

**FIGURE 5.** Storyboard from Students’ Photovoice Project “What Is the Correct Suit?” Showing Overlaid Images of Fruit and Suits with the Dialogue “Challenge Our Assumptions”



**FIGURE 6.** Screen Shot of Multicolored Question Mark from Students’ Photovoice Project, “What Is the Correct Suit?”



not paying enough attention to issues specific to trans experiences. However, the complicated nature of the vocal track, with multiple voices finishing sentences recorded in a single take, alongside the choice to undercut deep questions about the nature and function of labels and normalcy with visual humor, show their engagement with questions related to change and transition, and the literary genre of photovoice.

As in "The Circuit," the approach adopted by Abigail and Vince was also reflected in later curriculum-making projects. Abigail participated in the production of a music video exploring social norms and gender stereotypes, and specifically the expectations for young women to look and act in certain ways. As Abigail said in an interview: "We really connected to the part about how he [Gabe] was trying to break out of stereotypes. And as girls in this generation, we really related to that, always being stereotyped into being, you know, basic, and having this white, rich girl personality, that we're all supposed to be exactly like that." Clearly, this exhibits a deep understanding of how gender norms and labels affect everyone.

### Gender Is Like Music

The third group, Francis and Billie, also took up the importance of change as central to their understanding of the ways in which gender affects everyone, not just youth who identify as trans. The core metaphor of the piece is that the experience of growing up gendered needs to be seen musically—as something fluid, loving, and beautiful. As they say in their piece, gender has "variety, power, energy, personality, change, and love." The complete text of their poem/script is as follows:

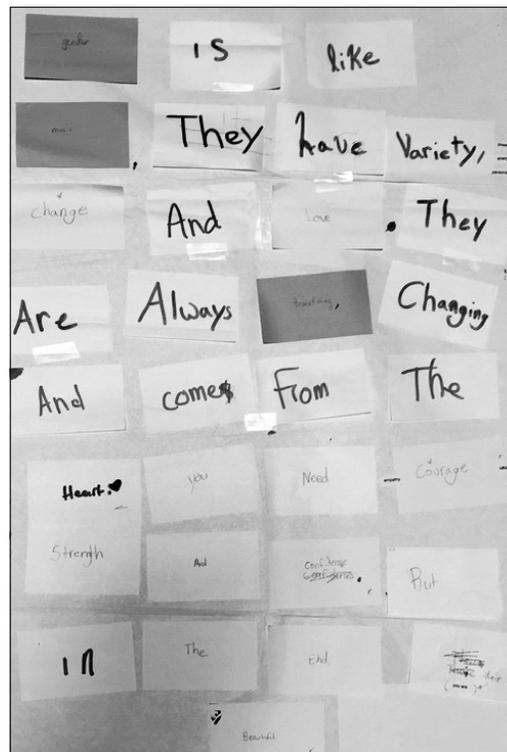
Gender is like music.  
 They have variety,  
 Power, energy, personality,  
 change and love.

They are always transitioning, changing,  
 and they come from the heart.

You need empathy,  
 courage,  
 kindness,  
 strength and confidence.

Everyone is like music.  
 But in the end,  
 you are all beautiful.

FIGURE 7. Poetry Script for Students' "Gender Is Like Music" Photovoice Project



Looking at the process photos from the group, the movement from brainstormed words into digital "scripts" for the video is made clear (see Figure 7). Their initial individual reflections about change that began the workshop have been placed together to create a strong collective statement about gender. Throughout, the group is very careful with language—they avoid using gendered pronouns and shift strategically from "they" to "everyone" to "you" as a means of implicating the viewer in their articulation of the ways that gender is always present.

In many ways this piece says all the "right" things about how to be an ally to gender diverse youth, and it also follows the assignment guidelines in clear ways. In part that had to do with Francis's personality. She was a strong presence within this group and also ended up leading the creation of a large mural for one of the final curriculum projects. She discussed the experience of leadership in an interview, saying, "I think I kind of took over with the project, I got really bossy. But it was really cool

**FIGURE 8.** Francis Works with a Student Teacher on Her Photovoice Project, “Gender Is Like Music”



to have people coming to you to see what to do. And it was interesting. It was really cool but also kind of scary because they're kind of depending on you to decide on what they want to do.”

The nuances of power and allyship within conversations around inclusion are surfaced in Francis's statement. As is often the case in statements of this nature, certain voices are supported, while other voices are excluded. On a pragmatic level, Francis was a consistent, creative presence, helping her peers to complete their photovoice project. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that Francis and Billie's choice to speak as allies comes with a certain degree of privilege. However, the final “you” that the poem rests on is an ambiguous and expansive “you,” one that implicates Francis and Billie as speakers as well as the audience who receives their message. Their careful use of pronouns allows us to understand all expressions of gender as valuable and present. One reading of the broad inclusivity of the final visual in Francis and Billie's photovoice project (illustrated in figure 8), which reads “you are beautiful,” is not as a declaration that imposes a particular ideal of beauty, but rather as an invitation to see everyone as always already beautiful.

## Implications

As these three projects make clear, student engagement with the genre of photovoice as a literacy performance was thoughtful, richly varied,

and creative. This suggests how an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle) that specifically encourages change, fluidity, and not-knowing can provide a framework for everyone involved to learn something, as Vince put it, that we “truly didn't know.”

Each of these projects represents different ways into broad questions of change and identity, and how those questions engage with the specifics of queer and trans explorations of gender. Michael and Matthew were able to use photovoice to uniquely express their perspectives on the interconnected web of power and language in shaping identity. Abigail and Vince saw the capacity of visual humor within photovoice as a way to undercut the normative force of stereotypes. Francis and Billie used their roles as allies to validate and affirm gender as a beautiful plurality.

We see the pedagogical, technological, and relational aspects of these projects as intertwined and equally significant. A pedagogy that welcomes the unexpected, taken up through a digital literacy assignment that itself invites a multiplicity of voices and approaches, alongside a critical engagement with queer content, is what led to the production of such engaged and engaging photovoice projects. These examples also suggest that photovoice as a genre, alongside a pedagogical approach that welcomes change and diversity, is particularly helpful within this current political moment. Photovoice allows students to open up multiple possibilities for interpreting their world and their identities—reading, writing, and critically rewriting them (Freire). As a “collaborative autobiography” (Kanu and Glor) of the classroom, the range of approaches exhibited in these projects makes evident the importance of directly addressing injustices to create different possible futures together. 

## Note

1. In this article, we use the term *transgender* in reference to someone whose sense of their own gender identity differs from the biological sex that they were assigned at birth. The word *trans* is often used as an umbrella term to include transgender people as well as various other folks who identify beyond a cisgender binary. For more information about terminology, please refer to [www.rainbowhealth.org/resources-for-you/patient-toolkit/patient-toolkit-welcome/glossary](http://www.rainbowhealth.org/resources-for-you/patient-toolkit/patient-toolkit-welcome/glossary).

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Photovoice is a technique that has participants take photos in response to a prompt, reflect on the meaning behind three of their photos, and share the photos to find common themes. It is an ideal strategy for all forms of classrooms. In this lesson, students are given a prompt, take photographs in response to it, post reflections on a blog, and search for commonalities while relating the pictures back to characters in texts they have read. It can be used as a prewriting activity for essays or other assignments. <http://bit.ly/2w7mkQQ>