I would like to take you into my classroom this morning. Here’s what you see: 31 students debating, discussing, and of course, digressing. You would see Donald—a master at beat making, not of homework; Mabel—intellectually capable, schoolwork incapable; and Martha—positive and enjoyable, yet positively distracted.

How can I engage these students to do the work that is required of them? In such a diverse urban classroom, technology has become a key tool for equity, literacy, and content building. Every year I have implemented projects using technology, such as digital storytelling, to engage students and enhance their achievement. However, without high-quality professional development such as the writing project provides, I would not have been able to implement digital storytelling in such a successful manner. I am here today to show how professional development is a necessity when using technology in the classroom.

I teach humanities at Life Academy, a small public high school in Oakland, California. Many of my students are immigrants and English language learners, almost 90 percent qualify for free/reduced-price lunch, and many face a life that is stereotypical of Oakland, with violence, gangs, and poverty. I am constantly faced with students who are wonderful but lack literacy skills. The writing project has given me a tool that has helped move these students forward not only in literacy but also in engagement.

Digital Storytelling is in fact what it sounds like. Students write and record a narrative that is then synthesized with images to create a film. The students love it because they are creating a “cool movie”; I love it because it is technology that teaches literacy and content. After studying immigration, my students interview someone they know who has immigrated to this country, write a first-person narrative of that story, record it using storytelling techniques, and create a storyboard with carefully selected images to match their voiceover. This project incorporates writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills while infusing history content standards.

I never saw Donald, Mabel, and Martha work so hard. They came to work after school and lunch. They each revised their work, re-recorded to make their stories sound better, and worked tirelessly to find the images that matched the tone of their story. They did this work because it was authentic. For the first time, someone was going to see their work, on the big screen, and it was going to be about someone they cared for deeply. They wrote the stories of their mother, father, and even a teacher. Having an authentic audience drove the kids to do their best work.

As transformative as this project is for students, none of it could have been possible without the writing project. I was shown the importance of process writing, revision, and audience. I was then taught how to use the technology. I was introduced to several different movie-making programs such as Adobe Premier and iMovie, had technology support from outside organizations, and was
supported in its use for many years afterward in sessions where teachers shared their best practices. I was taught how to use the technology as a writing tool as well how to make it work.

What is important is not just wiring schools. Simply giving access to digital media is not the answer. Professional development must help support teachers working with digital media. Without it, computers will sleep in classrooms and break. Wireless routers will be forgotten and no one will know how to use them. Online tools will not be utilized. In this era, it is imperative that teachers learn the technology because our students are using it. They are of the digital era. If we do not do our best to use it in meaningful ways and use it as a tool to help advance their literacy, content knowledge, and skills, we are not being strong educators. This is a way for teachers to use something within our youth’s schema and accelerate their learning.

The impact of professional development and technology has been tremendous gains in my classroom. If I had not participated in the writing project’s professional development, Donald, Mabel, and Martha would still be floating in my classroom. I would still be thinking of ways to engage them and get them back into learning. Instead, they have bought in to school. Donald enjoys creating and this project allowed him to create. Mabel was able to use her mother’s story to help her relate to the content and be proud of her history as it was displayed on the big screen. Martha’s social focus could be narrowed to the computer and this allowed her to invest her energy in the project. All three of them are seniors now, on their way to graduation. I can’t take all the credit but I can see how this project is one of the many things at Life Academy that motivates them toward working in class and succeeding in school.

I hope that you will continue to invest in professional development through the writing project. The writing project has pushed my teaching and truly impacted how kids learn in my classroom and at my school. This project alone has spun into many different projects in various teachers’ classes, such as chemistry and English, and has become a major graduation component for tenth-graders moving to the eleventh grade as well as seniors defending their work for graduation. A culture of digital inquiry has emerged at our school and we are seeing the benefits of technology as we have embraced it for the last five years. It can continue to benefit other schools as well as ours if they are supported as I was.

Thank you.