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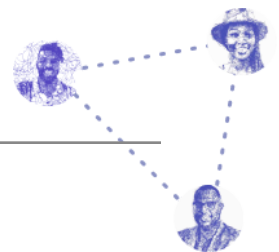
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Publication Date

2026-07-01

Making Meaning of Vocational Pathways using Open Storytelling: Braid as Method and Medium

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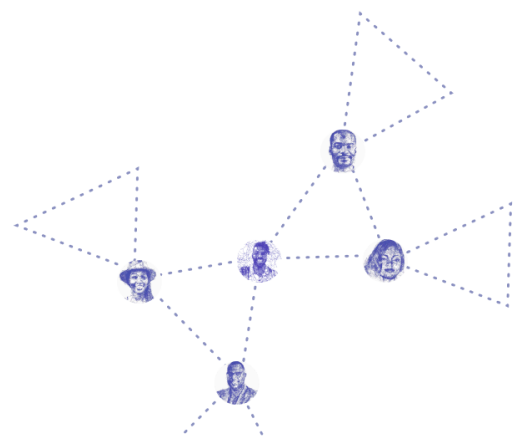
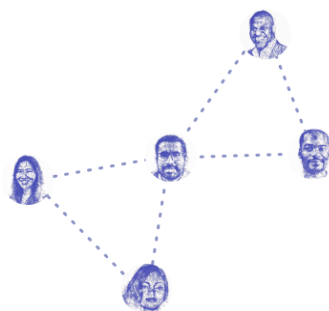


Summary

This paper looks at stories written by graduate students about how they found their way into environmental science careers. We show what they have in common, including their motivations, challenges, and opportunities. It also demonstrates the use of open storytelling and knowledge platforms, including our team's research prototype, Braid.

Situated within a broader research agenda on learning transfer and digital pedagogy, this paper presents Braid as a reflective learning platform and an emerging model that supports students in using storytelling to connect curricular topics to their lived experiences, translating knowledge, skills, and identity across academic, professional, and civic life.

This paper provides details on how Braid functions, including the platform's structure, features, and course integration. Drawing on student vocational reflections and their thoughts on using Braid, This paper offers initial findings for educators, researchers, and institutions seeking to better understand the use of digital platforms to advance academic outcomes, including the development of disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, communication skills, and students' capacity for reflective practice, narrative meaning-making, and the integration of learning across academic, professional, and civic contexts.



About the BRAID Project and PIT-KN

This work is situated within the Public Interest Technology Knowledge Network (PIT-KN), an interdisciplinary research lab at the University of Michigan's Institute for Data and AI in Society (MIDAS).

The PIT-KN launched with support from the Public Interest Technology University Network with an aim to better understand and support career pathways of innovators.¹ Our research and practice evolved to human-centered storytelling, sociotechnical systems and the transferring of learning in unstructured environments—across academic, professional, and civic life. Central to this paper is an examination of identity formation, skill development, and knowledge articulation that occurs beyond formal classrooms. In this respect, Braid functions as an emergent Third Space. As recent work on Braid suggests, storytelling-driven platforms can create shared environments where individuals translate lived, context-specific experiences into collective knowledge, effectively bridging personal and communal ways of knowing.² This process reflects Third Space dynamics by enabling the co-existence and negotiation of multiple epistemologies within a single, participatory sociotechnical environment.

Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, an in-between space where people from different cultures can meet and mix ideas, Braid operates as a place of potentially meaningful contact among cultures and people. For Bhabha, this space enables groups with less overt social and political power to resist and unsettle dominant cultural representations. Braid builds on this idea by supporting students in occupying and appropriating space for their own purposes: by sharing their stories, students can alter the meanings attached to that space.³

Braid's storytelling environment not only holds space for culture and connection but, through the learning that occurs when people share stories and through its open-source approach to knowledge exchange, offers potential for evolving context-aware content-moderation practices. Because stories surface nuance, history, and situated meaning, they can inform moderation systems that better respect context rather than relying solely on deterministic algorithms. Furthermore, a recurring concern in Bhabha's work is the power differentials that coexisting cultures may bring into a shared space. Braid invites a practical test of cultural relativism: when knowledge is framed as story, hierarchical claims to superiority are challenged by multiple, situated perspectives made visible through narrative.

[Braid](#) is both a research prototype and an open-source platform and knowledge network; it operates as a pedagogical tool and a storytelling environment (see Figure 1). Translating Third Space theory into practice

¹Tayo Fabusuyi, Jessica Taketa, and Raymar Hampshire, "[Building Career Pathways for Diverse Public Interest Technology Entrepreneurs](#)," New America, June 30, 2021.

² Tayo Fabusuyi, Pei-Yao Hung, Chia-Ying Hsieh, and Raymar Hampshire, Braid: Elevating Underserved PIT Practitioners and Student Voices through Collaborative Online Storytelling, Technovation, April, 2026.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36–39

raises important challenges. Realizing the possibilities of Third Space work requires that our pedagogical commitments extend beyond classroom activities to include design practices, data collection and stewardship, platform transparency, and trust-and-safety mechanisms. Only by attending to these sociotechnical dimensions can we cultivate an environment where storytelling, learning, and equitable participation reinforce one another.

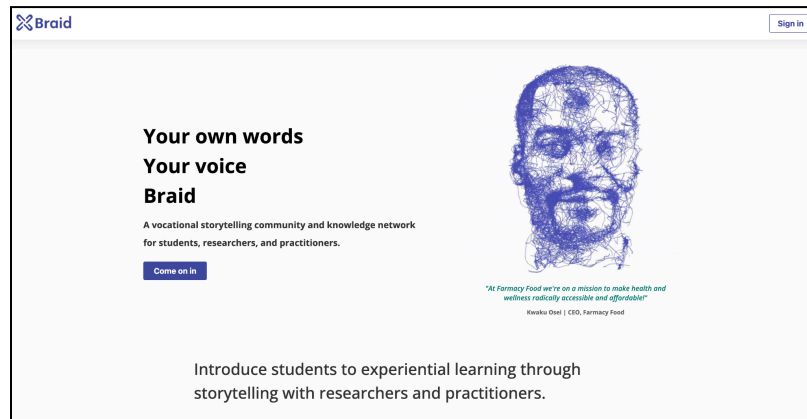


Figure 1: Braid Landing Page

In practical terms, Braid has a few core features, including reflection prompts and posts (braids), and collections of narratives situated within a shared space. A book mode feature and story tagging helps organize topics and the platform's only action, **braid** connects stories together. These design elements create a networked archive of human-centered narratives rather than isolated posts and comments (see Figure 2).

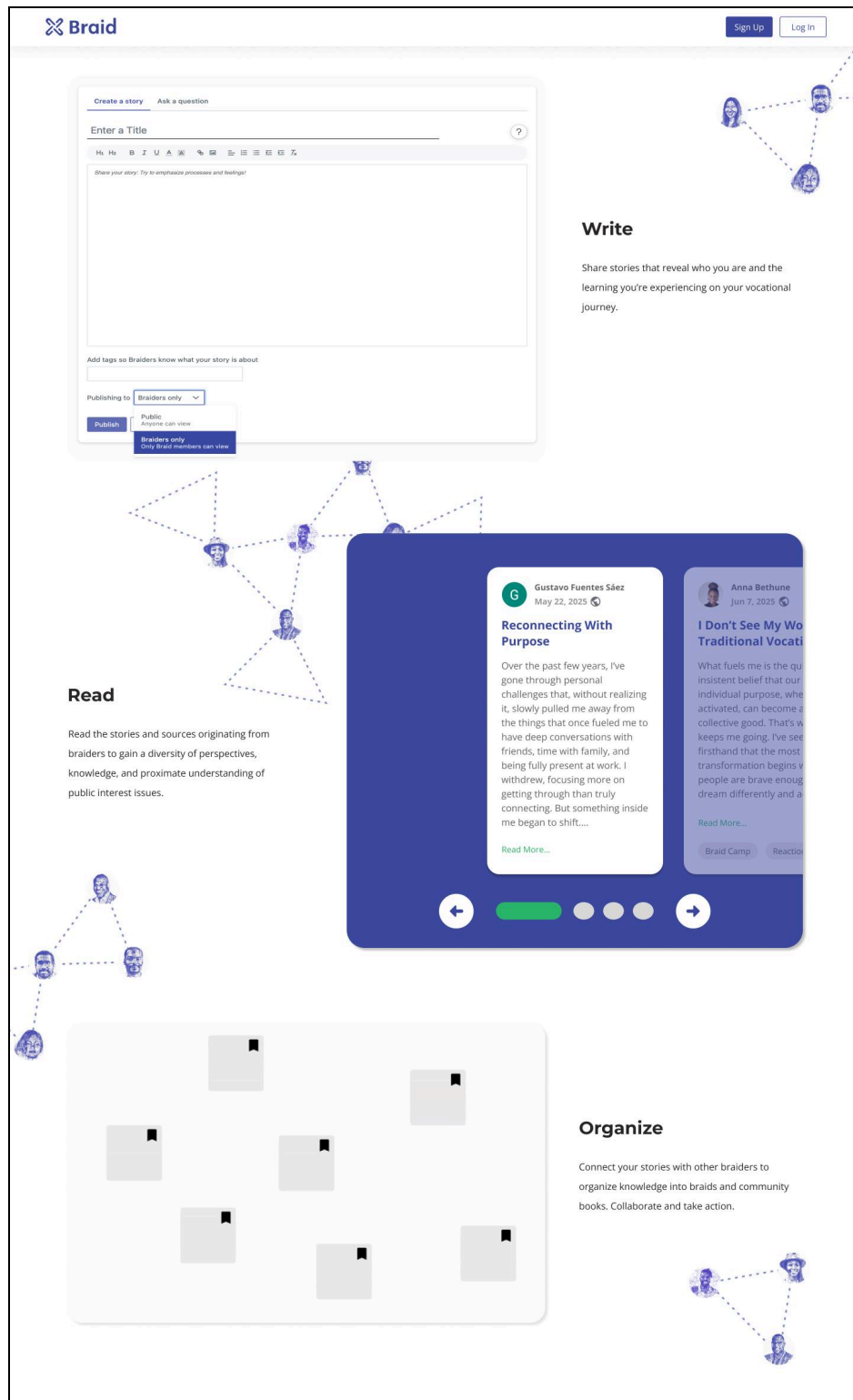


Figure 2: How it works (overview)

Methodology: Storytelling on Braid

The vocational narratives analyzed in this report were accessed on Braid. Narratives were published by graduate students who shared reflection style stories about their vocational interests using Braid.

Student Engagement

Course students accessed the platform and used the **story composer** to respond to the prompt assignment (see Figure 3). Students published their reflections and could also view the reflections of their peers. Tags were used to group their reflections and give structure to their learning environment. This structure allowed reflections to function not only as individual entries but as part of a shared Third Space for asynchronous learning engagement.

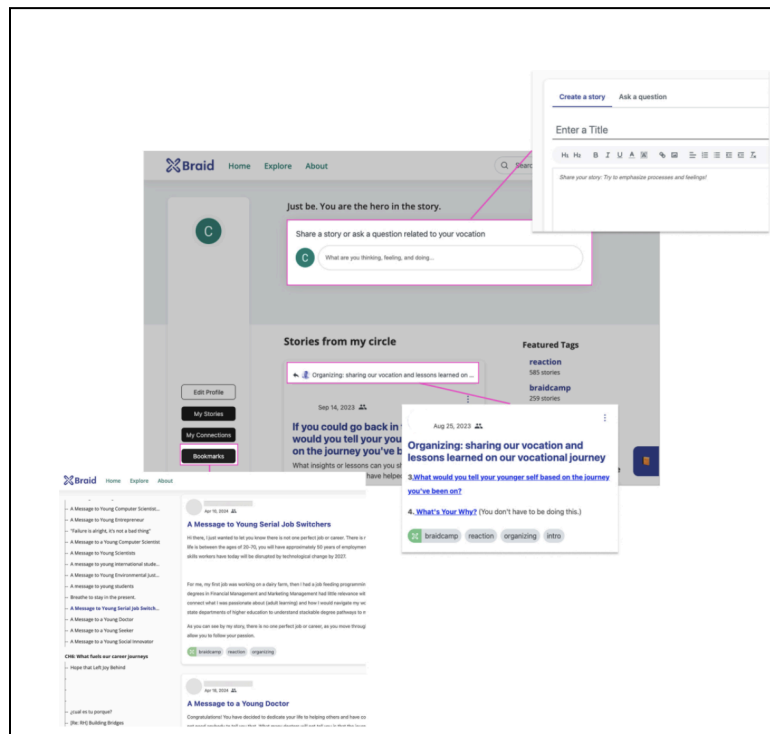


Figure 3: How it works (in-practice)

In alignment with PIT-KN's focus on learning transfer, these narratives are treated not only as the result of a course assignment, but as evidence of how students make connections across domains—linking personal experience, academic training, and future aspirations.

Post outreach

Follow-up outreach with students and a semi-structured interview was conducted to understand what student engagement looked like on an individual student level using Braid.

Collectively, these methods produced the qualitative dataset for this white paper.

Data Collection and Narrative Analysis

To protect participant confidentiality, all data were fully anonymized prior to analysis. Real names were replaced with pseudonyms (e.g., Participant #1, Participant #2), and any specific identifying details—such as specific locations or unique biographical markers—were removed or generalized.

Afterwards, narrative data was imported into an LLM for thematic clustering, all transcripts underwent a rigorous de-identification process. All thematic findings and interpretations were subsequently validated by the researcher to ensure the contextual integrity of the narrative analysis.

Students as Storytellers and Knowledge Producers

Storytelling on Braid bears strong resemblance to the type of narratives produced through ethnography in that it draws on first-person narratives to uncover lived experiences, cultural contexts, and identity formations. However, it diverges from traditional ethnography in three ways:

1. **Separation from the Field:** Unlike conventional ethnographic work, no field site visits or direct interviews were conducted.
2. **Self publishing:** users share self-published reflections of their lived experiences and knowledge.
3. **Storytelling for method design:** narratives also offer critique and insight for designing new methods for storytelling.

Vocational Themes - Environmental Sciences Pathways

The vocational narratives in our study revealed five key themes from graduate students studying environmental sciences:

1. **Roots in Place and Identity** - Many students tied their career motivations to their home environment and communities. For example, one wrote about growing up near a river, where witnessing environmental degradation influenced their outlook. Others rooted their personal commitment in ancestral homelands and the struggle for indigenous sovereignty.

2. **Justice as a Core Motivation** - Students described entering environmental work not only from ecological concern but from recognition of systemic injustice. One student reflected:

“I was drawn to [this work] because I was eager to speak up for those who cannot, and enact change to support us all.”

3. **Academic–Professional Bridges** - Undergraduate experiences, whether in environmental law, anthropology, or humanities, provided early exposure to vocational concepts. These seeds grew into graduate-level commitments, often reinforced by work experience (e.g., consulting for a city or nonprofit).

4. **Tension with Academia** - Narratives often grappled with the contradictions of studying environmental sciences at universities:

“How do we navigate our need for the education and resources of this university, while struggling with the knowledge of what this university is actively perpetrating?”

“I want to somehow figure out a way for students, faculty, and staff to respectfully discuss topics...”

These tensions highlight the dual role of academia as a valuable resource for students, while also being a subject of critique.

5. **Community and Solidarity** - Students found strength in shared storytelling. Whether through climate activism, archival recovery, or food justice, their work emphasized collective resilience. Many noted how engaging with different communities deepened their collective understanding.

Collective Meaning-Making in Open Storytelling Spaces

Braid functioned as both a pedagogical tool and shared digital space for reflection. Participants used the tool to publish reflections and could read each other's narratives, creating opportunities for shared meaning-making and connection.

One student reflects on their experience engaging with course materials and archival narratives:

“I had an incredible time digging into archives, learning about whose shoulders my peers and I were standing on, and seeing my city in a more complex way. It is painful to think how much is lost in silences and I wanted to immerse myself in this coursework as a way to reflect on what it even means to be in a class such as this, where the objective is to uncover what has been restricted and find ways to make sense of our reality.”

This reflection illustrates how storytelling within the course—and through platforms like Braid—extends beyond documentation. Rather than functioning solely as qualitative data, these narratives represent an active process of uncovering untold histories, situating oneself within broader social and environmental contexts, and making meaning of complex and often obscured realities.

This process of meaning-making is further shaped by the shared nature of the platform environment. As students publish reflections and engage with the narratives of others, storytelling becomes not only an individual exercise, but a collective one—where perspectives are encountered, compared, and reconsidered. In this sense, Braid functions less as a repository of static reflections and more as a dynamic space of narrative exchange. Participants are able to situate their own experiences alongside those of their peers, drawing connections across different backgrounds, interests, and approaches to environmental work. This mirrors how learning often occurs in informal digital spaces, where exposure to a range of lived experiences deepens understanding over time. At the same time, as subsequent reflections suggest, this shared visibility introduces both opportunities for connection and ongoing questions about how students interpret, trust, and engage with narratives in an open storytelling environment.

At the same time, these reflections also surface important questions about whose perspectives are present during storytelling—and whose are absent—in these shared spaces. As one student noted:

“...I want to somehow figure out a way for students, faculty, and staff to respectfully discuss topics on... when there aren't people around to lead or gently correct. In my own short time here, I haven't seen it done as well as I had hoped and I would like that to change even after I leave.”

Braid aims to address this, however, there are challenges with online spaces as another student highlights:

“As for [Braid], I'm still learning the power and possibilities of these platforms. I am aware of the conflicts surrounding information privacy, data access, and collective knowledge building. We have to

pick our battles, and mine will preferably be outside of the online platform space. But the online space takes up so much of our lives, so I'm grateful for platforms that try to do their work with a justice lens from the very beginning."

This duality highlights the balance between embracing online tools for knowledge development through storytelling, while remaining critically aware of the challenges and limitations of these shared spaces..

Others expressed optimism about the potential of Braid to broaden learning and advocacy. As one student put it:

"Platforms like Braid offer the chance to amplify these interconnected issues, creating a space to advocate for solutions and learn about today's issues. I hope to use these platforms not only to deepen my learning but to contribute to the learning of others as well."

Another highlighted the role of Braid in expanding awareness of less commonly known vocations, including environmental justice:

"I think utilizing online platforms like Braid could be helpful to expand knowledge of environmental justice. It's not a commonly known field, but a lot of people could benefit from knowing about it. I have had to explain to so many people what it is when I got accepted into graduate school because nobody knows what it is."

Student Integration Experience: Storytelling, Social Learning, and Platform Design

To better understand how Braid functioned in practice, we conducted a follow-up interview with an anonymous graduate student in the course. They described using Braid (and other tools) as part of a master's thesis examining shifting social-ecological values of beavers. The participant explained:

“My thesis is basically about understanding the social ecological values of beavers—how those values have shifted over time in people's perspectives. People assigned them value as economic commodities during the fur trade era. Now they're seen as ecosystem engineers. But some people without ecological backgrounds think beavers cause trouble in local communities because their dam building can harm crops and infrastructure.”

The participant's research examined how these shifting valuations influence public opinion and environmental policy:

“I'm wondering how these values have shifted over time, and how they influence people's opinions on beavers, and how we can make people share their ideas and perspectives together—to see if we can balance beaver conservation with human–beaver conflicts and community well-being.”

“I created a module based on my findings from archival materials—how people used beavers as trade commodities, how Indigenous people viewed them as essential providers for daily nutrition. There are all different types of perspectives, and I shared them on the Gala platform.”

Workshops were then conducted to test narrative clarity and accessibility:

“I conducted workshops with my classmates and with people who don't have this background—to let them know these stories and get feedback. I wanted to see how I could improve my narratives and writing so more people could engage in this tough conversation.”

Braid as a Preliminary Shared Space

Braid was introduced early in the course as a low-stakes, exploratory writing space:

“Braid was introduced as a kind of an introduction method. We were asked to frame our thoughts and just freely express what we think. I didn't write very carefully or care about grammar mistakes, because we were told to just freely express what we wanted to do.” (see Figure 4)

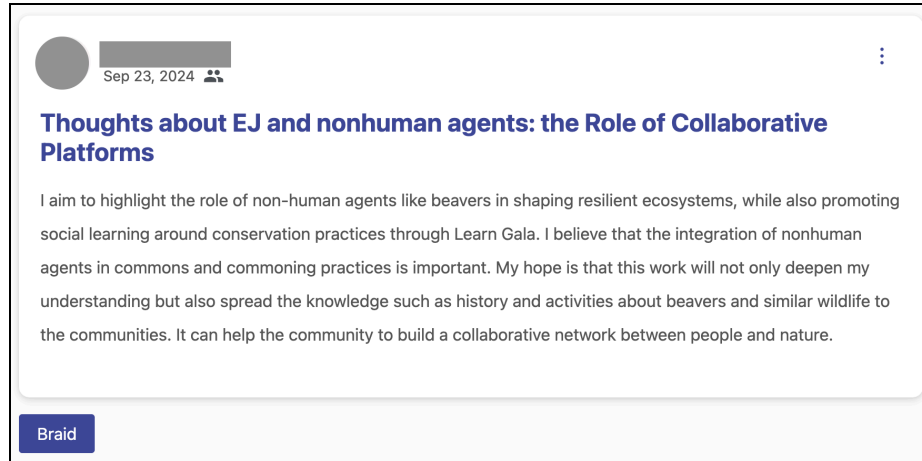


Figure 4: Example of vocational reflection

The participant characterized Braid primarily as a shared rather than private space:

“I think it’s more like a shared space. We can see each other’s thoughts, so we can learn from them and kind of improve ourselves.”

Student engagement centered less on personal biography and more on interests:

“I learned more about what topics people [students] are interested in. Not really their personalities, but their interests. Some care about energy justice. One person wanted to use filmmaking to promote environmental justice. I learned that through Braid and through sharing ideas.”

Online reflection facilitated deeper in-person dialogue:

“You first read everyone’s thoughts online, and then you directly connect in person. That mixed method is very useful. I could express my opinions and see if I could help their ideas, and they provided useful comments to my module.”

One peer suggested incorporating ecological reproduction data to inform management strategies:

“Based on using Braid, one person mentioned I could look at beaver reproduction data—like when they give birth and how many each year—so we can have more proper management strategies. That was a really interesting perspective.”

Community Formation

The participant described Braid as a “preliminary introduction tool” that eased social friction:

“If you directly come to class and everyone is a stranger, some people might feel afraid of expressing themselves. Braid provides a way for people who are introverted or have trouble talking with others. They can type and let people learn about them first. Then in person, they won’t feel isolated.”

When asked whether Braid built community or primarily supported individual reflection, the participant responded:

“Right now, I would say students use it more as individuals. But it has potential. If more courses required it, and if it develops further, it could engage different stakeholder groups and connect people with different backgrounds.”

Academic Language and Accessibility

A recurring theme was the tension between academic writing and accessible storytelling:

“Sometimes you freely share your thoughts in a way people understand. But when you use academic writing style, some people feel it’s awkward or difficult to understand. There needs to be a balance.”

The participant reflected on feedback received:

“My classmates told me I used too many academic words. Some don’t have background knowledge. Maybe when people use Braid, there could be reminders to use understandable words—but not too freestyle. There should be a balance between academic communication and daily language.”

Limitations

The participant identified a structural limitation:

“One thing I found is it’s hard to share narratives with people who are not students or not in academia. That’s a difficulty. In the future, I want to engage more public people into the Braid discussion.”

This comment highlights a key implementation opportunity: while storytelling platforms may foster intra-cohort dialogue, additional integration and coordination is required to support broader public engagement beyond academic communities.

Discussion

This paper highlights several key tensions and opportunities at the intersection of digital storytelling, pedagogy, and career development.

Collectively, student narratives and follow-up interview sentiments illustrate both the possibilities and challenges of digital storytelling platforms as both method and medium. Narratives suggest that Braid operates somewhere between a public diary-like outlet and a shared discussion space: students write individual reflections, and those reflections are visible to peers and can shape later discourse.

At the same time, students' level of engagement depended heavily on how Braid was integrated into their learning environment. Our study revealed that while some students experienced Braid as a meaningful space for shared reflection and connection, others reported minimal interaction with the platform beyond using it to complete the course assignment. This variation reinforces a key finding: platforms alone do not produce community, but can support social learning and community formation under certain conditions.

Across the narratives and interview data, one theme that emerges alongside learning and reflection is the question of how students experience trust and safety when sharing personal or vocational stories on a digital platform. As one participant reflected:

“We were asked to just freely express what we think... I didn't care about grammar mistakes... it's more like a shared space... we can see each other's thoughts and learn from them.”

This description suggests that the platform can lower barriers to participation, particularly for students who may feel hesitant to speak in traditional classroom settings. However, the openness of digital storytelling also surfaces deeper concerns about how safe and inclusive these spaces actually are.

As one student noted, even within academic settings there are challenges in creating spaces for respectful and informed dialogue, particularly when key voices are absent:

“I want to somehow figure out a way for students, faculty, and staff to respectfully discuss topics on Indigenous people when there aren't Indigenous people around to lead or gently correct... I haven't seen it done as well as I had hoped.”

This reflection highlights that trust and safety are not only technical concerns (e.g., privacy, data use, and platform governance), but also social and cultural ones—shaped by facilitation, representation, and the presence or absence of lived experience in dialogue.

Together, these insights raise a central question that sits at the core of ongoing Braid research, storytelling, and design:

What conditions are necessary for students to experience a storytelling platform and Third Space as a trustworthy and safe space for sharing experiences, learning & education, and career development?

This question is further complicated by students' broader awareness of digital environments. As another reflection notes:

“I’m still learning the power and possibilities of these platforms... we have to pick our battles... but the online space takes up so much of our lives.”

We consider the results of this question our practice, which begins with using Braid itself as an open (inclusive) space for existing users to reflect, publish, and participate as a co-creator (open source contributor) of what trust and safety on Braid entails. (see Figure 5).

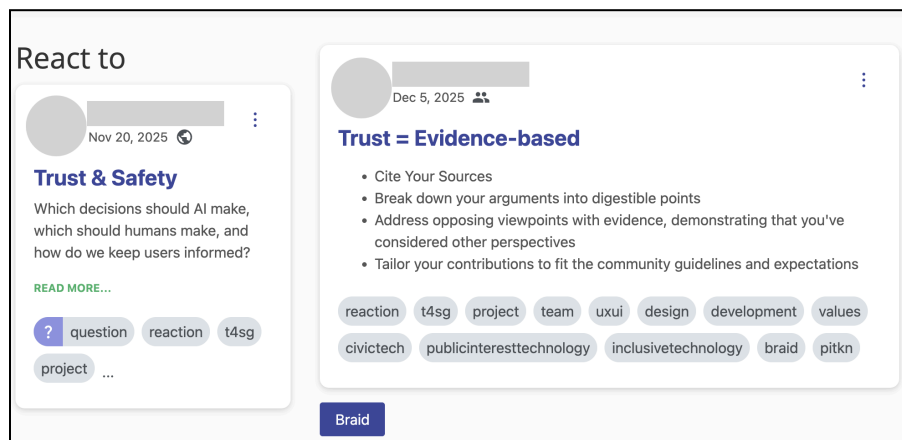


Figure 5: An example of using Braid as a design probe for trust and safety

Overall, this dual awareness—both openness to digital storytelling and caution about online platforms—illustrates the complex role these environments play in contemporary learning. Within the Braid project, questions of trust, safety, and responsible digital infrastructure are therefore not peripheral concerns, but central to understanding how and whether meaningful engagement occurs.

Why We Think This Matters

By leveraging Braid as both method and medium, this approach supports research and inclusion in several ways:

- **For students**, Braid can function as a Third Space within academic settings—an open source environment that sits between formal coursework and informal peer interaction—where they can asynchronously contribute, learn from one another, and make meaning from vocational narratives.

- **For researchers**, Braid offers an open approach to qualitative inquiry that blends elements of ethnography, auto-ethnography, and digital humanities methods, while also generating insight into how learning and identity formation unfold across digital environments.
- **For the broader public and educational communities**, Braid demonstrates how thoughtfully designed social platforms may facilitate social learning, contribute to student enrichment, and support connections that extend beyond individual classrooms.

However, the findings reinforce an important insight highlighted by reviewers and supported by the data: platforms alone do not produce community. Braid supports social learning and the potential for community formation—through structured storytelling prompts, shared visibility of narratives, and the possibility of extending conversations offline—but these outcomes depend heavily on how instructors and students integrate the platform into coursework and the broader educational experience.

In this sense, the study reframes Braid not simply as a tool that creates community, but as an environment that can enable reflective storytelling, peer awareness, and emergent forms of connection—particularly when conditions of trust, facilitation, representation, and repeated engagement are intentionally cultivated.

Conclusion

The graduate students in this study illustrate how vocational pathways into environmental sciences are shaped by the interplay of personal experience, academic training, and institutional context. Through Braid, these reflections were translated into shared narratives that function not only as qualitative data, but also as artifacts of ongoing identity formation and meaning-making.

We demonstrate how Braid operates as a structured storytelling environment—one that makes individual reflections visible, networked, and available for engagement. In doing so, it creates the conditions under which reflection, peer awareness, and connection may emerge. Our findings indicate that community formation is not an automatic outcome, but a contingent one—shaped by how the platform is implemented, the consistency of its use, and the extent to which students actively engage with one another’s narratives across both online and in-person contexts.

At the same time, the findings underscore that trust and safety are central to whether these conditions lead to meaningful engagement. Students’ willingness to share openly—particularly in ways that move beyond formal academic conventions—depends on whether the platform is experienced as a space where they can express uncertainty, navigate sensitive topics, and be visible to others without undue risk. As reflected in the narratives, even within academic settings, creating spaces for respectful and informed dialogue remains an ongoing challenge, particularly when key voices are absent. This highlights that the effectiveness of storytelling platforms like Braid is not only a question of technical design, but of how they are socially, culturally, and pedagogically embedded.

As students increasingly supplement their academic experiences through social and digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit, institutions of higher education face a growing opportunity—and responsibility—to offer intentional environments for reflective, trust-based engagement. Braid offers a useful case for understanding how these Third Spaces can support storytelling, learning transfer, and peer connection, while also foregrounding the conditions—trust, accessibility, facilitation, and sustained participation—necessary for those connections to take hold.

In this way, Braid contributes to a broader conversation about the role of digital infrastructure in student development. Rather than serving as a standalone solution, it demonstrates how open storytelling platforms can be integrated into a larger ecosystem that supports reflection, connection, and care as core components of the learning experience.