Foreword

When I was in college in the early 1960s, I wrote all my assignments by hand; then I “typed them up” on a tiny manual typewriter, praying I could avoid typos, which were almost impossible to correct. By the time I wrote my dissertation, in 1976-77, I had acquired a miraculous IBM “self-correcting” machine and was as close to technological heaven as I could imagine—which only goes to show how limited my imagination was! Even in 1985, when I got my first computer, I had little inkling of how this technology would change my life as a writer, reader, and speaker.

But I’m getting ahead of myself, because before I could plunge into the digital world, I had to learn to teach print-based writing. As always, my students helped me, but I also had the benefit of amazing intellectual mentors, among them Mina Shaughnessy and Geneva Smitherman. From them I learned to read between the lines of student writing, to listen deeply and rhetorically, and to respect what all of my students bring with them to writing tasks. From “Dr. G,” as Smitherman is affectionately known, I especially learned to revel in student experimentation, pushing against and beyond the restrictions and borders of the school essay. Slowly, I began to feel comfortable teaching students to write clear and compelling print-based texts.

The thirty years since then have given me something like Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride (from The Wind in the Willows and now a Disney ride), as I’ve learned to create a website, compose digital texts with embedded sound and images, blog, and participate in social media. In my particular journey into the digital age, I’ve been guided again by my students: working together, we’ve learned to reach audiences around the world and to build rhetorical prowess through our intense engagements with technology.

In the process, I’ve also had fine mentors, such as Cynthia Selfe, Keith Gilyard, Henry Jenkins, James Gee, Vershawn Young, and especially, Adam Banks, with whom I had the honor to team teach a course on writing in the digital age. In addition, my ongoing research on college student writing has demonstrated that students today are writing and reading more than ever before, that they are deeply attuned to audiences and how to reach them through use of a wide range of genre and media, and that they are determined not only to consume what others have thought and said but to produce knowledge themselves. Moreover, in a five-year longitudinal study of student writers at Stanford, I learned that students are deeply enmeshed in communication on the Internet, especially through social media, and that they use these communicative opportunities to make their voices heard.

To achieve such a goal, however, all students must have access to today’s technological tools. Yet as Adam Banks points out in Race, Rhetoric, and Technology, such access is too often limited to students in affluent schools and communities. The technology gap is real, and it is growing. Banks argues for systematically broadening access and bringing all students into the digital world.
Enter Kendra N. Bryant and the authors of *Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media*, a volume devoted to achieving broad access to digital literacies in college writing courses. Bryant’s Preface makes a compelling case for such a project, and the 16 essays included here provide a wealth of information on how to use everything from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram, Tumblr, Word Press, and Wikipedia to engage student writers in developing personal and academic voices worth listening to. Readers of this volume will, I believe, especially value the very concrete description of assignments and activities, the careful attention to the development of student hearts as well as minds, and the tough-minded assessment of failures or stumbles alongside successes.

If you have integrated social media into your classroom, this volume will provide you with rich comparative data. If you have not integrated social media but are willing to give it a try, you will find here a clear, cogent introduction to how best to do so.

In my view, *Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media* goes a long way toward broadening access to the digital literacies students today need to be part of what Henry Jenkins calls a “participatory culture.” As I continue on my own journey toward full digital literacy, I am grateful for this thought-provoking volume.

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