Chapter 2

Blog Love: Blogging (And Microblogging) Communities as Writing Classroom Companions

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ABSTRACT

Despite claims of a decades-long history of multimodal instructional activities, Composition Studies scholars are still slow to embrace many web-based, social media technology tools to help realize traditional goals of the college writing classroom. Microblogging (Twitter) and blogging (WordPress) activities are effective technology companions that support collaborative learning, critical research, and analytical writing models. This chapter suggests online reading comprehension and critical literacy models as guides for microblogging and blogging lesson design. Finally, instructor commentary and student samples from two assignments, (a) blogging communities and (b) using Twitter to critically analyze a text, are offered to illustrate the aforementioned application.

Technology allows us to live out theoretical perspectives; but sometimes technology appropriates those theoretical positions, amplifies and transforms them. It is not always theory to embodiment. It is sometimes embodiment to theory. – Cynthia Selfe

INTRODUCTION

Although there is a more companionable embrace of technology in the composition classroom, blogs and microblogs, such as Twitter, are too infrequently employed as viable tools for helping writing students reach long-discussed course goals. The merits of collaborative learning, writing that contributes to the proverbial “Burkean parlor,” and discovering the usefulness of outside knowledge in writing classroom creations are often delineated as important instructional components (Lunsford, Ede, Moss, Papper,
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Walters & Brody, 2012; Bruffee, 1984). Still, there are few in Composition Studies who turn to technology companions such as blogging and microblogging as a means to that end.

In this chapter, I submit that student blogging (Wordpress.com) and microblogging (Twitter) facilitate several of the historical aims and still emerging traditions of the composition classroom. Emphasized is the application of a pedagogical lineage respectful of a sociocultural lens, collaborative learning and rhetorical situation instruction. Most importantly, I demonstrate how online and offline reading comprehension models of literacy scholars offer guidelines for engaging blogging technologies in ways that strengthen student research writing, evaluation and strategic reading abilities. In this chapter, I will discuss Composition Studies and reading comprehension scholarship that inform sought after critical evaluation practices in the writing classroom; profile two in-class activities using Twitter and community blogs; and, offer teacherly observations and student examples that illustrate how they use social media for textual analysis and collaboration. By sharing student creations, descriptions of writing activities and commentary, I hope to encourage others who may be tentative about experimenting with technology tools; this chapter joins a body of work that widens the scope of composition instructional practices and makes the incorporation of multimodality, albeit deictic, more normative.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Growing Pains: Student Writing Traditions, Multimodality, and “New Media”

Pedagogical approaches that incorporate technology often illustrate how participatory culture manifests in the classroom; these approaches are anchored in a liberatory education lineage that is also taken up by composition scholars. Adopting critical pedagogy precepts (Freire, 1972; Shor, 1996), writing teachers seek to nurture student agency and independent thought. This advocacy for student agency, clarity about their own positionality and voice is often articulated with metaphors such as the “Burkean parlor,” named after Kenneth Burke. This trope situates student writing in an existing conversation (Lunsford et al., 2012). Connecting the dialectic traditions of the field to collaborative meaning making, Kenneth Bruffee (1984) claims that one of the main goals of collaborative learning is to provide students with a social context and a community of knowledgeable peers. Discourse communities as invaluable outside knowledge (Gee, 1989), which is knowledge that is also a meaningful guide to textual analysis (Huckin, 1992), reflect the sociocultural underpinnings of composition educators work.

According to Jason Palmeri (2012), new media in the composition classroom has pedagogical roots that date back to the 1960s with the use of analog technologies. Because computers in the writing classroom grew more prevalent in the late 1980s, some composition studies scholars both encouraged and admonished teachers who were eager to incorporate new media into writing course activities; they warned that, without strategic use, this “new” classroom companion could inadvertently reinforce old problematic practices. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher (1991) cautioned that computers are cultural artifacts destined to mirror dominant values of the educational system (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991, p. 55). They observed that classroom culture with computers maintained what Paulo Freire (1972) described as “the banking” model of education or continued to form “Siberianized” students (Shor, 1996) who subscribed to teacher-pleasing, rendered expected responses to problems and wanted to ingest, rather than create new knowledge. “We argue that computer technology offers us the chance to transform our writing classes into different kinds of centers of learning if we take a critical perspective and remain

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