Chapter 4

From Expository Blog to Engaged E-Portfolio: A Student-Centered Pedagogy in Process

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates a student-centered pedagogy in process through the example of an electronic portfolio final assignment in two First-Year Writing courses. The philosophy behind the assignment is based in cultural studies, constructivist pedagogy, and multimodal studies. If students learn by doing, they also learn about culture through critique, public writing, and reflection. Students can thus become engaged as writers and citizens through constructing web-based texts focused on social issues and written from personal perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago I taught two versions of an upper level writing class in which students learned html and designed their own web pages as their semester-long writing projects. Students had the whole semester to read and discuss topics related to internet and society, work on related writing assignments, do research for their final projects, and design and build websites. When I no longer had the opportunity to teach that class, I stopped using web technology other than the basic course management systems for each class; integrating web design into First-Year Writing or creative writing courses seemed more distracting than productive. In the academic writing courses, I wanted students to focus on traditional reading and writing skills and not add extra work with the introduction of technology requirements. Eventually, though, I began to assign weekly blog writing to replace hard-copy response writing in creative writing classes, and I started more fully utilizing the course management systems for writing and discussion in composition courses. I’ve also come to believe that web technology can no longer be compartmentalized or kept separate from the rest of the course content in any of my courses. Since web 2.0, internet use has become more interactive, and our uses of internet and social media cannot always be neatly separated.

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from other daily practices. It is now also easier to make writing available online without having to learn html, transfer files, or figure out web hosting. In all of my courses, students now write responses and reflections on blogs, and create electronic portfolios as their final semester projects.

This chapter describes and reflects on my experience giving a final e-portfolio assignment and the related pedagogy and assignment scaffolding. The samples of student work included here come from two recent First-Year Writing courses focused on community, citizenship, and culture. The course content and assignments during the semester were designed within a context of critical, constructivist, and multimodal pedagogy. The final portfolio assignment was both specific in terms of requirements and open to students’ creative interpretations, though not all students were comfortable with the creative freedom. Although I have learned a great deal about integrating web-based technologies, social media culture, and student writing into the pedagogical goals for this course, I still feel new to the design and implementation of the final portfolio assignment. With each iteration I encourage students to participate and construct on their own terms, offering them both structured guidance and space for their own creativity and innovation. This student-centered pedagogy integrates theory and practice with the goal of deeper engagement in both teaching and learning, and within the context of community, collaboration, and public writing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community, Citizenship, Culture

Aristotle asserted that no matter what one calls it, whether democracy or oligarchy, a government only works when its members have equal access, as citizens, to education and participation in the system of governing (Jacobis, 2013). Benazir Bhutto knowingly risked her life, after her own father and two brothers had been killed, to fight for democracy in Pakistan (Baughman & Siegel, 2010). Frederick Douglass emphasized the importance of critical literacy for emancipation from mental and legal slavery (Douglass, 1892). Martin Luther King, Jr. called on white and black mainstream America to come together to change the laws that kept segregation legal, as a step toward justice for all Americans (King, 1963). Jonathan Kozol and Marian Wright Edelman show readers how as a society we are failing the poorest and most vulnerable in our society: the children in under-resourced communities, and that we are responsible to do better (Loeb, 2004). And in Soul of a Citizen (2010) Paul Loeb encourages individuals to overcome feeling overwhelmed or helpless in the face of social ills and to take even small actions toward change. Grace Lee Boggs exemplified this in her life’s work advocating for justice for people in Detroit and in motivating others to join the cause, reiterating the idea that we can be the change that we want to see (Boggs, 2012). These examples tell us a lot about how social change has happened throughout history: extraordinary individuals take on issues and work to create that change. What we don’t always realize is that these same individuals began as ordinary citizens.

Contemporary students are overwhelmed with responsibilities including working part or full-time jobs while going to school, or having caretaking responsibilities in their families. But they are also especially vulnerable under changing economic conditions and decreased social safety programs. They are leaving college burdened by debt and at risk of not finding professional work for which their degrees have prepared them. Social Security and healthcare loom as big question marks in the future for those for whom retirement is a long way off. What some students don’t realize is that they are also citizens who