Chapter 5
Principled/Digital: Composition’s “Ethics of Attunement” and the Writing MOOC

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ABSTRACT
This essay argues that the primary goal of writing instruction should be the cultivation of an ethics of attunement. This is a habit of mind that allows a writer to adapt to the demands of context and therefore engage in successful rhetorical action. The ability to cultivate this habit of mind is the standard by which MOOCs, or any other writing instruction technology, should be judged. Working from this premise, the essay critiques MOOC-based instruction methods. It finds a deep tension between MOOC models and the theories of knowledge, learning and being which underlie contemporary writing pedagogy. This indicates that MOOCs, as they now exist, may be unable to satisfy composition’s ethical imperative.

WITHER THE MOOC?
The recent history of massive open online courses or MOOCs is nicely encapsulated in a pair of quotes from Stanford professor and Udacity cofounder Sebastian Thrun. In March of 2012, presaging what the New York Times would christen “the year of the MOOC,” Thrun, enthralled by visions of academic disruption, hypothesized that in ten years, “job applicants would tout their Udacity degrees…. In fifty years… there will be only ten institutions in the world delivering higher education and Udacity has a shot at being one of them” (Krauss, 2014, p. 223). Eighteen months later, after the high-profile failure of a project with San Jose State University to offer credit-bearing MOOCs, Thrun’s expectations were notably deflated. “We were on the front pages of newspapers and magazines,” he told Wired magazine, “and at the same time, I was realizing, we don’t educate people as others wished, or as I wished. We have a lousy product” (Krauss, 2014, p. 224).

Thrun’s comments indicate the extent to which MOOCs, after a period of high initial expectations, tumbled into what marketing theorists call the “trough of disillusionment.” What happens next though? If the history of emergent technologies is any judge, the MOOC may soon rise again, expectations tem-
pered. Indeed, at the time of this writing, it appears that such a transition may already be taking place. In the fall of 2015, Arizona State University, in partnership with MOOC-provider edX, began offering a wide range of credit-bearing MOOCs (Straumsheim, 2015). Soon ASU anticipates that students will be able to complete their entire freshman year via MOOCs. In other words, though “a lousy product,” MOOCs aren’t dead. But the form they will eventually assume, their relationship to traditional instruction, and their overall efficacy as a learning tool remain to be seen.

How will MOOCs change writing instruction? Some predict evolution rather than revolution. Arizona State, for example, promises that its new freshman writing MOOC, despite enrolling students in the thousands, will be “the same in all essential respects” as an offline writing course (Straumsheim, 2015). Perhaps it will be. For writing teachers though, the question remains: how will we know? By what standard should we judge future writing instruction technologies? The following will seek to answer this question. In particular, this essay will present the teaching of writing as a fundamentally ethical enterprise. According to this view, composition is both shaped by and responsible for cultivating a certain ethics. Any technology, institution or logic, which impedes this mission, must be resisted. In short, before we know what to make of MOOCs, we need to have a standard by which to judge them. The following will attempt to articulate the theoretical basis for such a standard.

**COMPOSITION + ETHICS**

I am not the first scholar to suggest that at its core, composition is, and must remain, an ethical enterprise. John Duffy (2014), for example, argues that an understanding of the ethical, and the cultivation of what he calls “ethical dispositions” in our students, is composition’s “prevailing disciplinary narrative and… teleological reason for being” (p. 226). This is a bold claim. Indeed, some may reject the idea that composition, which rightfully prides itself on drawing from a diverse array of theoretical traditions and institutional sites, can even have a “prevailing disciplinary narrative.” I believe, and I’m sure Duffy would agree, that the story of what we do can (and should) be sketched in myriad ways. Pursuant to the ever-practical, ever-contextual nature of rhetoric though, Duffy sees the current moment as demanding a certain degree of disciplinary self-consciousness. In response to present social conditions, we need to “get our story straight.” This means articulating what we do and why as to provide a compass heading by which to guide our field’s engagement with the world. I agree. If composition is to be socially relevant, we must know where we stand. This is especially true in regard to our relationship with technological innovations such as MOOCs.

As Duffy sees it, all writing instruction—no matter the pedagogy or institutional venue— involves the teaching of ethics. How can this be? Duffy ties it to the nature of the rhetorical act. Writing, and rhetoric in general, is a social activity, one which entails relations with others and therefore, requires judgment about the terms on which those relations will be conducted. The writer, Duffy argues, must make value-laden choices about occasion and audience, means and ends. Anytime we teach these choices we teach ethics.

James Porter (1993), in his seminal essay “Developing a Postmodern Ethics of Rhetoric and Composition,” further explains. He writes that rhetorical action “always involves a negotiation between competing positions and perspectives, between abstract principles and theories and particular needs and circumstances” (p. 221). In other words, in the rhetorical act, the writer must hold abstract principles (what is true, good, possible) in tension with an array of contextual demands. This involves an on-going