Chapter 11
Complicating Communication in Computer Mediate Environments: A Textual Analysis of Blogs in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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ABSTRACT
Building on the research produced by early and current computers and writing scholars, this chapter will look at the results of an analysis of both virtual- and classroom-based texts produced by nine first-year writers, five from composition I and four from composition II courses at a mid-sized, Midwestern, public university. The research included in this chapter explores the results of how blogging affected student writing in the first-year writing classroom. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the results of this study in relation to the explicit and implicit textual signals and how these textual signals complicate communication in computer mediated environments.

INTRODUCTION
In the spring of 2005, while teaching an introductory writing course, I realized that certain terms were occurring repeatedly in the papers that students were submitting. For the first time in my experience, students began submitting essays that, with some consistency, had lexical errors often associated with communication in online environments. Even after commenting on the appearance of words such as “cuz” and “u” (for “because” and “you”), I found that some students still turned in formal papers with these errors. That semester I incorporated blogs into my writing classes for the first time. Although their blogs were not graded on grammar or spelling but rather on content, I couldn’t help but wonder if the Internet language markers that were appearing in student essays weren’t somehow related to their use of blogs in the class.

The experiences I noted in my reflections about the semester became not only a point of interest, but also became the basis of a research study the following fall. That semester I set out to explore if blogging affected student writing in the composi-
tion classroom. My goal was to have students write traditional academic essays in addition to their blog posts like I had in the spring. This time, however, I wanted to take my observations further and perform textual analysis. As I introduced my students to the blogging component of the class, I also explained to them that I would be asking for permission to analyze their blog posts and their essays at various drafting stages.

I hoped to explore how computer mediated environments, especially when introduced into the classroom, may complicate communication for students. I knew students entered an English class with certain expectations. For example, repeatedly students comment on how they are surprised that their required college English classes focus primarily on writing, whereas their high school required English courses were a mixture of literature and English. At the same time, I expected students to enter certain writing spaces with preconceived notions about what is appropriate. Students feel confident in the split between the personal and the academic writing they do – and in truth, often do not see their personal writing, which may very well occur in online spaces, as writing. While the research did demonstrate that few students blogged prior to entering the class, all had experience interacting in online spaces. In interacting in these spaces then, students were likely aware of the possibilities of creating text – and even if they were unsure of how to produce texts and products, they were aware of the possibilities. In asking students to blog, often seen as a very personal form of writing, as a class assignment, I wondered how the blogs would be approached. Would students take advantage of the images, links, text alterations, and the many other possibilities the web provides for writers, or would students default to traditional, academic prose? The complication in communication then rests in student expectations. Would there be a struggle between academic and personal writing with the blog, and if so, how would it play out? Additionally, would asking students to blog complicate their understanding of more traditional essays? While getting students to write more is a good thing in a writing class, how would students demonstrate their ability to write in many, varied spaces to very different audiences and with very different expectations? The goal of my research was to create a sound beginning for further examination of the affect blogging and other web-based writing has on student writing and students’ abilities to maneuver between various writing spaces.

While I had seen what I hypothesized as cross-over of Internet dialects into the classroom, my suspicions were not new. For years educators and scholars have been concerned that the new, evil technology would ruin the pristine, established method of communication. Even though there is this fear, one that goes even back to the invention and introduction of writing, technology has been a guiding force behind the evolution of education as well as communication. Dennis Baron (1999) points out that composition instructors and writers in general have been the first to accept and embrace the technology advances in general. Baron says “the computer is simply the latest step in a long line of writing technologies. In many ways its development parallels that of the pencil” and he continues by saying “[a]lthough I’m not aware that anyone actually opposed the use of pencils when they began to be used for writing, other literacy technologies, including writing itself, were initially met with suspicion as well as enthusiasm” (1999, p. 17). Technology advances are and have been important to writing and the development of teaching writing. Were it not for items that we take for granted such as pencils and cheaply made paper or even writing, the teaching of writing would not be what it is today.

In the chapter that follows I will look at the results of a semester-long analysis of both virtual- and classroom-based texts produced by nine first-year writers, five from composition I and four from composition II courses at a mid-sized, Midwestern, public university. The research included in this chapter will explore the results