

Paperless Writing in World Literature I: Can Students See the Forest without Writing on the Trees?

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“A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus
And his love Thisby; very tragical mirth.”
Merry and tragical? Tedious and brief?
That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow.
How shall we find the concord of this discord?
-Theseus, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

The social networking site Facebook currently records 400 million active users.¹ IDC reported that a quarter of the world’s population regularly used the internet in 2008. 85% of teens use social networks for messaging, according to a 2008 Pew Internet and American Life Report.² Meanwhile the Blackboard Learning System is, according to its website, “the most widely-adopted course management system among U.S. postsecondary institutions.”

As a teaching assistant I have attempted repeatedly to integrate Blackboard’s discussion board feature as an extension of the classroom environment, inviting and indeed requiring students to post weekly responses to their course reading assignments. While a respectable number of students post articulate, developed insights, many responses reveal minimal critical thought. In addition, few students write in direct response to the postings of their peers, and fewer return to the board to post a second or third time. As easy as it is for students to navigate the web during their free time, and as eager as they are to express themselves through social

networking websites, text messages, and instant messenger, why do instructors encounter such resistance to navigation and self-expression on academic-themed websites?

Another Pew Internet study provides a possible answer. The 2008 report, “Writing, Technology and Teens,” finds that “teens disassociate e-communication with ‘writing’” and that “[e]ven though teens are heavily embedded in a tech-rich world, they do not believe that communication over the internet...is writing” (i-ii). As teachers of English and composition, we are faced with a rather daunting question: what *is* writing, then, if/when it is not communication? When we require students to write on discussion boards, do we get exactly what we ask for—writing, not communication? To borrow a question Kathleen Blake Yancey asked in 2004, “How is it that what we teach and what we test can be so different from what our students know as writing? What *is* writing, really?” (298).

Considering these questions means entertaining the very real possibility that the proliferation of electronic technologies have created what Stephanie Vie calls a “Digital Divide” (13), in which “students possess technological know-how and access to computers but lack critical technological literacy skills” (10). Cynthia Selfe suggests that “[b]y paying critical attention to lessons about technology, we can re-learn important lessons about literacy. It is the different perspective on literacy that technology issues provide us that can encourage such insights” (419). Part of this different perspective involves what Walter Ong, as early as 1982, identified as “a new awakening ... to the orality of speech” (17) and a recognition of writing as “an imperialist activity” (12). And yet, at that time, any newfound attention to or appreciation of orality as orality, “words ... totally dissociated from writing” was, according to Ong, impossible:

The words keep coming to you in writing, no matter what you do. Moreover, to dissociate words from writing is psychologically threatening, for literates' sense of control over language is closely tied to the visual transformations of language: without dictionaries, written grammar rules, punctuation, and all the rest of the apparatus that makes words into something you can "look" up, how can literates live? (14)

Almost three decades later, the internet generation has come ever closer to the kind of dissociation Ong assumed could never be complete. How they have managed to do so is the first question to pursue.

In his analysis of early poets coming directly out of oral culture, Ong identifies a common, formulaic manner of "thought and expression . . . [Y]ou scratch out on a surface words you imagine yourself saying aloud in some realizable oral setting" (26). What, then, does this generation imagine themselves doing when they communicate virtually versus when they write traditionally in a classroom setting? What kinds of spaces do they envision while engaged in what many if not most of them clearly judge to be separate activities? Many composition scholars have written articles urging resistant faculty to incorporate technology into their classrooms in the effort "to better account for the demands of new collaborative literacies" (Moxley and Meehan) and other rhetorical developments that have been fostered by digital culture, but it seems equally important to anticipate and analyze student resistance to this incorporation. They have their own ideas about what is appropriate inside the classroom versus outside it, and if the Pew study is any indication, these spaces do not easily mix.

Early theoretical work on the Internet has focused on the opportunities provided by virtual realities, which, "in their difference from real reality, evoke play and discovery,

instituting a new level of imagination” (Poster). According to Mark Poster, the ultimate “effect of new media...is to multiply the kinds of ‘realities’ one encounters in society.” Poster is careful to point out that we are not dealing with a simple opposition between real and unreal. “Virtual and real communities mirror each other in chiasmic juxtaposition,” he explains. “Just as virtual communities are understood as having the attributes of ‘real’ communities, so ‘real’ communities can be seen to depend on the imaginary.”

But it appears it is this very understanding of a dialectic between “real” and “imaginary” that has been lost. The intriguing but somewhat unfortunate student responses to a survey I conducted in the Spring of 2009 suggest that the “real” community of the world literature classroom, and thus the writing produced in and for that community, may have little if anything to do with the imaginary. In response to the question, *Do you believe that electronic communication improves or weakens the average person’s writing abilities?*, 70% of the 110 students surveyed claimed that electronic communication weakens writing abilities. Within their answers, however, many of them defined their understanding of what writing is and how writing happens:

Weakens, the vocabulary you use in electronic communication is mostly slang and by using it so much you get used to it and forget *proper grammar* and *educated vocabulary*.

Weakens, because most online communication is meant to be brief, leaving little room for *exacting diction*.

I believe it weakens our abilities. In electronic communication people use abbreviations, myself included...It’s hard to switch back to *proper writing techniques* after you’ve been on Facebook for awhile.

I think it weakens it. I can personally say that I become much more lax with *grammar* and I use things like lol.

People get lazy and use “chat lingo.”

As this sample of responses illustrates, most students surveyed define writing as a purely technical exercise, an experience bound by rules of grammar, diction, vocabulary and other “proper techniques.” The complicated relationship of writing to rhetoric—the act of persuasion³—may be implied in these descriptions of writing as *educated*, *exacting*, and *proper*, but what is missing is any significant exploration of writing as an imaginative process or of language—especially inside the classroom—as anything but a static, manipulable tool, or a method to memorize. Joan Leach’s explanation of rhetoric as fundamentally contingent, deriving its power from “its immediacy, its ability to talk about the particular and the possible, not the universal and the probable” (211), seems reversed in these responses which come so close to reducing writing to proper grammar and an approved vocabulary. Other survey responses are more telling, for some students went a step further and overtly dissociated electronic communication from writing:

I don’t believe it has any effect. Communication online is completely different from writing for school.

Neither, it makes them different...Online writing might help a person’s *impromptu skills* but does not necessarily help extended writing abilities.

Neither, they are apples and oranges, at least for me. I believe even the average person writes one way online (extremely *improper*) and very academically sound when necessary.

Personally, I separate my electronic writing from my academic writing. But I feel that online talking opens up a *more personal* feel of communication because you don’t get caught up in the grammar of the Queen’s English.

If one is not in school and is not made to write papers or paragraphs summarizing things or stating their opinion, then it could weaken a person’s writing abilities. But, I think it is more a way of being *creative* with your language...

These explanations are important because they posit a less formulaic understanding of online communication, one that reinforces earlier points by Poster and Ong. According to these

students, electronic writing offers the opportunity to be creative, impromptu, personal, even improper—unstructured, in other words—while academic writing traps them, *catches them up in*, an impersonal, uncreative, unimaginative, structured, mechanical—and perhaps even ultimately noncommunicative—experience.

The questions under discussion are not new to the field of literacy theory. Johndan Johnson-Eilola has discussed the persistent idea in Composition classrooms that “the text is a product, a concrete, relatively bounded object for viewing, even though it develops through a process of critical inquiry and may enact or reflect social changes” (21). According to Johnson-Eilola, while composition instructors have made real efforts to place more value on “the collection and arrangement of information,” primary value is still placed on the finished textual product, the effect being that “texts are valued when they speak [or seem to speak] in a single, authentic voice” (22).⁴ Yancey comments further on the same phenomenon: though many students, as “members of the writing public,” have learned “to write, to think together, to organize, and to act within [electronic] forums—largely without instruction and, more to the point here, largely without *our* instruction” (301)—inside the classroom, a student writer “is not a member of a collaborative group with a common project linked to the world at large and delivered in multiple genres and media, but a singular person writing over and over again—to the teacher” (310).

The degree to which college students have already internalized this overemphasis on product should not, in turn, be underemphasized. My own experimentation with Blackboard Chat bears this out. Transcripts from several chat sessions on the African epic *Son-Jara* demonstrate students’ tendency to arrive at general consensus and to avoid dissensus. In one session, students

discussed the question, *Does magic help or hinder the characters in Son-Jara, and why?* One student submitted the possibility that magic both helps and hinders characters; another student quickly agreed that “a pretty solid argument could be made on both sides.” Neither of these arguments were made, however, and two minutes later the moderator abruptly moved on to the next question. A second group attempted to discuss “the war with summara [sic] or whatever his name is,” but after three students admitted being confused about “the whole story,” the moderator moved on to the next question without any discussion at all. A third group conducted an enthusiastic discussion about the manipulative actions of the gods in the epic—but, in fact, the *Son-Jara* includes no pantheon of gods, so most of the students’ discussion proved textually inaccurate.

In examining these and other conversations, two deductions seem valid: the closer groups came to consensus, the further they moved from the text, and the closer they came to dissensus, conflict or confusion, the more likely they were to cut the conversation short—as if exploring that confusion were not an option due to the possibility that it might not be resolved. I hoped that moving away from asynchronous communication (through discussion boards) and toward synchronous chatting might prompt more flexible but also more engaged and productive discussions of the literature, and that my minimized presence as the authority might increase student participation. Certainly more students participated, but each chat group operated by an unspoken agreement to, well, agree. Resolution was what these students wanted—in class and online. So the online classroom became just that—another classroom. Granted, there were plenty of grammatical errors, plenty of lazy writing, plenty of lingo and slang, but the other opportunities provided by electronic communication suggested by critics like Poster—discovery,

play, new levels of imagination, multiple realities, etc.—vanished in favor of a superficial solidarity. Consensus became the goal; often specifics of the text had to be disregarded if consensus was to be reached, but students could at least congratulate themselves on “finishing” a conversation. Consensus was treated as product.

If electronic spaces provide opportunities to communicate more freely, then why the compulsory tendency toward consensus? *Were* my students communicating in these chat rooms, or were they “just” writing? In my enthusiasm for integrating electronic chat into the classroom, I was perhaps guilty of naively assuming that the technology would work its “magic” on its own, overlooking the fact that Blackboard chat is an electronic space that is necessarily attached to a classroom, and therefore attached to all the perceived restrictions and expectations of academic writing.⁵ Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the inevitable presence of power relations inside any pedagogy, along with the equally inevitable concealment of that power. But Bourdieu also examines “the likelihood of the arbitrariness of a given mode of imposing a cultural arbitrary being at least partially revealed as such” (15). This likelihood “rises with the degree to which [among other factors] the cultural arbitrary of the group or class undergoing that PA [pedagogic action] is remote from the cultural arbitrary which the PA inculcates” (15). The survey responses quoted above indicate that students certainly feel distant or even detached completely from the pedagogy of the writing classroom, and Blackboard Chat—attached as it necessarily is to an academic site—did not succeed in offsetting this detachment. Students apply and reinforce their own restrictions as a result of the perceived disassociation between communication and writing. Electronic writing may be less constrictive than writing for school, as the surveys suggest, but once incorporated inside the classroom, e-writing is somehow stripped of that potential.

This presents a problem for technological determinists like Marshall McLuhan. Though he prematurely legitimizes and celebrates our translation back into orality (McLuhan 72), McLuhan can still shed light on the shifting attitudes toward writing, literacy and identity. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and elsewhere, McLuhan argues that new forms of communication are extensions of human senses. The printed book is an extension of the visual sense, and while such an extension privileges a fixed, individual point of view, thus privileging *individualism*, it also inspires an “inevitable drive for ‘closure,’ ‘completion,’ or equilibrium” (4). With this move from the ear to the eye, words are translated into mass-produced, uniform, repeatable commodities, “things.” Print “was the first mass-produced thing...the first uniform and repeatable ‘commodity,’” and the effect was a “visual homogenizing of experience” and an “ingraining of lineal, sequential habits” (125). McLuhan explains the paradox of the power of print, which “install[s] the reader in a subjective universe of limitless freedom and spontaneity” even as it “induces the reader to order his external life and actions with visual propriety and rigour” (157). Now and in the future, McLuhan goes on to explain, the conflict will go “the other way” (157):

The highly literate and individualist liberal mind is tormented by the pressure to become collectively oriented. The literate liberal is convinced that all real values are private, personal, individual. Such is the message of mere literacy. Yet the new electric technology pressures him towards the need for total human interdependence. (157)

McLuhan is certainly not imagining these pressures, but he exaggerates them in his eagerness to see the new technology take hold. Ong’s more conservative understanding of the shifting conception of literacy may be more relevant:

Electronic technology has brought us into the age of “secondary orality”... [b]ut it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality...[W]e are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically. The individual feels that he or she, as an individual, must be socially sensitive. Unlike members of a primary oral culture, who are turned outward because they have had little occasion to turn inward, we are turned outward because we have turned inward...[S]econdary orality promotes spontaneity because through analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing. We plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous. (136-137)

On their surface, student survey responses seem to support Ong’s theories; the majority characterize electronic communication as a new vocabulary or “lingo” with its own rules and codes, distinct from “proper grammar” but invented in direct response to what is “proper.” If Ong is correct, then in talking about e-writing we are not automatically talking about an entirely new form of communication; we are talking about a different space where the same things may go on—the same emphasis on homogeneity, the same valuing of product over connection and collaboration, the same attitude toward language as a manual, manipulable, assembly-line skill—a closed system instead of an ongoing dialogue. Mikhail Bakhtin best articulates what is so wrong with this view: “To live means to participate in dialogue,” asserts Bakhtin, “to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life...He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium” (qtd. in Morson and Emerson 60). “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person,” Bakhtin says elsewhere, but “it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin 110). For Bakhtin this interaction can and must

occur everywhere, not just in certain privileged spaces—such as the internet. If Bakhtin is right, and to *live* means to participate in dialogue, then dichotomies that pit Internet against Academy as effective or ineffective spaces for communication do not make sense.⁶ They only distract us from the conversations we should be having about how new media “change, through their affordances, the potentials for representational and communicational action by their users” (Kress 5) and what effects new modes of communication have on “human, cognitive/affective, cultural and bodily engagement with the world, and on the forms and shapes of knowledge” (Kress 1). To accept at face value the student survey responses would mean throwing out altogether the idea that “social networking tools constitute a major new way to construct and disseminate knowledge” (Moxley and Meehan) or that technologies have managed to “intervene into human interaction” (Mueller 241) in any way that actually counts. The medium is only part of the message, and the emphasis on process over product is only part of a struggle that also includes (re)making the classroom into a relevant space and reinforcing the connection between writing—*any* writing—and critical/imaginative thought. As teachers of composition and literature, it is our duty to model for our students not just how to use but also how to talk about the forms of communication we so ardently embrace, and in so doing, explode the persistent myths about language that drive students to reinforce, without provocation, tendencies toward passivity and hollow consensus, despite having the tools at hand to challenge and defy the limitations of such tendencies. Let us acknowledge, as Jeff Rice suggests, “the fundamental historical fact that the logic, rhetoric, poetics of electracy have to be invented every bit as much as does the equipment” (xi).

To this end, I have introduced in my classes another experiment with online communication—a world literature wiki. Over the course of the semester, students are required to insert weekly posts to various pages of the wiki (each page, at least initially, is dedicated to a single work on the syllabus); in addition, students have full access to page design. They have the option of adding new content to existing pages, editing or rearranging content added by others, or creating entirely new pages. The result is a rather delightful mess, for such an approach models “a rhetoric that is not entirely argumentative in nature but rather one which reveals information in unfamiliar ways” (Rice 40). Pages are dissonant and inconsistent and richly multi-vocal.⁷ Like Joe Moxley and Ryan Meehan, my goal is “to balance the emphasis on winning and individual effort with an appreciation for the values of sharing knowledge and collaborating to develop knowledge.” In addition, I wish to approach the intersubjectivity McLuhan so zealously celebrates, and to distance students from the programmatic spontaneity identified by Ong. I hope that in looking at and studying the wiki students will reach a point where it becomes less and less essential to identify who contributed what, who “owns” what, where one voice ends and another begins.

It is by no means a perfect assignment; like other teachers, I have encountered resistance among students to edit each other’s work and risk “violating the original text” (Cleary et al.), a resistance that could be tempered by a greater effort on my part to demonstrate specific revisionary strategies and other more appropriate responses to the wiki’s “creative chaos” (Cleary et al.).⁸ But one of the best ways to avoid what Heather James calls the “brilliant failure” “Wikilite” is to embrace the creative chaos of all the other aspects of a World Literature course.⁹

The catalog description for World Literature I at the University of Arkansas includes the following statement of purpose: “A study of world literatures from approximately 2500 B.C. to approximately 1650.” Any attempt to “cover” a representative portion of literature coming out of 4000 years of world history is a recipe for creative chaos, no matter how carefully organized your syllabus. Students recognize immediately the turbulence of such an ambitious agenda; recognition turns quickly to experience as they attend regular class sessions, which always rely on class discussion and participation as opposed to straight lectures. By welcoming the introduction of elements of disruption into a typical class meeting, students may be less averse to the disruptive aspects of the course’s online components. Also, though the wiki stands in undeniable contrast to the researched papers students submit individually near the end of the semester, class time is also spent emphasizing the ways in which the projects are *not* opposed. The researched paper may of course *look* significantly different than a wiki page *looks*, but the constructive-without-being-constrictive process that goes into making both projects, both texts, is parallel.¹⁰ Researched essays can communicate thought and discovery as sincerely, as imaginatively, and perhaps as disruptively (in a good way),¹¹ as any blog or wiki posting.

At the end of *Orality and Literacy*, Ong asserts that “we cannot do away with texts, which shape our thought processes, but we can understand their weaknesses” (169). And just as importantly, given the transitional period in which we find ourselves, we can understand their strengths. We can understand that some of the weaknesses attributed to texts *produced* in classrooms are false. We can understand and emphasize that when we ask students to do research and write essays, we are not asking them to swim in completely unfamiliar waters. Nor are we dropping them into an assembly line and requiring that they blindly push buttons in an attempt to

artificially manage a skill for which they've had no training. When we ask students to write—wherever, whatever—we are asking them to think, and thinking is a process that is always familiar even as is it never exactly repeated, even as it has no memorizable formula. It is this emphasis on formula that we need to crush, and we cannot do that by encouraging dissociation between electronic and traditional communication. They are not the same, but nor are they different in the way my student survey responses suggest that they are. If we continue to encourage students to think that the internet is the place to go to be creative, thoughtful and imaginative, while school is the place to go to endure a mechanized and artificial experience of learning, we will graduate a generation who values education in the humanities even less than the currently employed generation, and who come to language like rude mechanicals anxious to please our predictably sophisticated skepticism. We must prove that we are more willing than Shakespeare's Theseus to “find the concord of this discord.” Or, we might accept the legitimacy of the discord itself and, like Puck, invite our students' imaginative complicity in a process they are fully capable of walking through, eyes open to the whole forest, not only the trees.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>

² See <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Writing-Technology-and-Teens.aspx>

³ See Leach.

⁴ Rebecca Wilson Lundin agrees that “the field has repeatedly recognized its own limitations with regard to single authorship but has yet to shift significantly toward a more fluid model” (438).

⁵ Stuart Selber calls this the “myth of the all-powerful computer” (4) and urges a rejection of all “theories claiming that technology alone creates educational change;” he instead locates “the potential for such change in a nexus of social forces” (8).

⁶ As Richard Lanham puts it, “[t]he arts and letters cannot be taught by means of a technology that stands at variance with the technology that creates and sustains the general literacy of its society [T]he ‘humanities crisis’ that has been our routine cry for a century and more is one we have manufactured ourselves by distancing ourselves from the world” (117).

⁷ In addition, “[b]y providing a record of this messiness, the wiki helps students who expect writing to be linear and much neater see that the mess is productive.” See Michelle Navarre Cleary, Suzanne Sanders-Betzold, Polly Hoover, and Peggy St. John.

⁸ See also Lamb; James.

⁹ James claims she “ended up using wiki as pumped-up PowerPoint.” She describes a “fill-in-the-blanks approach” similar to what I have used in creating separate pages for each work of literature on my syllabus. I agree it would be nice to see students “identify the blanks themselves, and build from there,” but I also believe the wiki provides enough opportunities for student autonomy that my initial authoritative scaffolding is not critically troublesome as an obstacle to learning.

¹⁰ Though, as I also emphasize, they do not have to look completely different. Since I grade all essays online, I welcome the insertion of graphics as well as links to various multimedia. It is true, however, that much more could be done to integrate more effectively these two major assignments—essay and wiki. Jeff Rice’s work will be particularly helpful in this endeavor,

eager as he is to see the field of Composition “accept a lack of order as one type of pedagogical directive for writing” (58).

¹¹ From James’ “My Brilliant Failure:” “[T]here is a great potential in this tool to be completely disruptive (in a good way) to the classroom setting.”

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