

All Along the Watchtower: Some Kind of Way Out of Basic Writing Using Emerging Technologies.

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Although many learning institutions and composition instructors have adopted some form of digital media project alongside of, or in lieu of, traditional essays, perhaps as many or more of them are either still on the fence about using technology and new media projects in composition curriculums. They understandably wonder whether new media projects provide beginning college students with the writing skill set they need to progress through the academy and their future careers. Some instructors worry they'll become overwhelmed and find themselves without the necessary training or access to the appropriate technology. By focusing on conventional modes of composition and institutional and personal doubts, we ignore the vast technological revolution influencing the work world and our every day lives, and we endanger the success of students. Engaging students in networked, public discourse and virtual, digital products can strengthen their analytical and writing skills, but, perhaps more importantly, can empower these student's voices and connect them to more than their local communities. Often our most vulnerable students are enrolled in the very institutions that lack access to, or are perhaps more skeptical about, hybridizing composition and new media. By failing to engage these students and equip them with digital media skills alongside of composition skills, we place new barriers between them and the academy, and we continue to perpetuate social and educational inequality.

In the last few years, many scholars have written about the important role and implications that technology has had for the way education thinks about learning. Kathleen Blake Yancey's 2009 report to the National Council of Teachers of English stated that English pedagogy must be given a complete technology overhaul. In that same year, Davidson and Goldberg collaboratively produced "The Future of Learning Institutions in a Digital Age" as part of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning. Davidson and Goldberg unfurl the possibilities of what constitutes a learning institution in the digital age and argue towards a rethinking of learning and teaching in virtual, connected "spaces" inside and outside the bounds of conventional learning institutions like universities. Numerous other scholars have written about the challenges, rewards, and pitfalls of using technology in the writing classroom. Some scholars disagree about the "digital divide," whether or not it's still present, relevant, or if it's evolved to represent a new separation. In this paper, I delve into the doubt that many underprivileged institutions and those who teach there have about bringing technology-driven pedagogy to basic writing or underprepared college students. This doubt serves as a window we can peer through, not just to ponder the causes and solutions of this reticence in teaching and administration, but also as a bond that ties these institutions to their students, students who are plagued by doubts about their abilities to perform up to the academy's standards. I contend that this doubt is a location of tension, one that we can explore and perhaps by doing so discover ways in which technology-driven pedagogy and education can enable these institutions, instructors, and students to gain the self-efficacy necessary to claim their portion of societal influence and economic means.

At the small HBCU where I teach, almost all incoming freshmen test into the first level of composition, essentially part one of a two-part basic writing sequence. In addition, the vast majority of students are first-generation college students, most of who are perceived to lack college readiness, particularly in terms of their ability to communicate in writing. Similar to the students taught by co-writers of "New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions," professors Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark, the students I teach also have profound responsibilities outside of the classroom, from supporting parents to supporting young children, as well as complex educational and personal histories. Many students announce to me right away that they are from "the hood" and that these neighborhoods are where they will return to on weekends and university breaks.

Announcing their street-savvy identity is one-part dare—try to teach me anything valuable I don't already know—and one-part threat—don't humiliate me by revealing just how much I don't fit into the college classroom environment. These students “are at risk on many levels, teetering on the edge of that ever-elusive American dream” (Klages and Clark 35). Yet, perhaps these students also have the most invested and at stake in education as a means for social and economic leverage.

Especially for those of us teaching under less than privileged conditions, and particularly given our current moment of economic crisis, a moment that is also continually revolutionized by new technologies, it's time for those teaching college composition to ask crucial questions. How does a student's digital acumen predict his or her academic success and ultimately job placement and economic earning potential? How is access to digital learning determined by race and class even at the university level? How do forms of new media and digital composition affect a learner's ability to build traditional composition and reading skills? How can digital learning initiatives be a force of change at institutions of higher education operating at the boundaries of higher education that serve first-generation, underprepared, and historically oppressed and impacted populations? How do we free our students from the stigma of skills-based writing courses while providing them with the writing skills necessary for academic success? How do we rationalize spending time teaching technology-based skills without overlooking students' very real need for increased literacy? Although finite answers to these questions may not yet be within our grasp, now as never before, one of college composition's aims, and particularly an important focus for basic writing studies', should be two-fold: to use technology and new media to help historically oppressed groups gain access into the language of the academy and also gain a foothold in public power by utilizing and publicizing their voices and perspectives in a way that has never before been so possible and proliferate.

In the MacArthur Foundation report, “The Future of Learning Institutions in a Digital Age,” scholars and educators Cathy Davidson and David Goldberg survey the current state of the digital divide, stating that “[i]n the United States, incarceration correlates with poverty and digital access correlates with educational opportunity and wealth. Despite government pronouncements to the contrary, ‘digital divide’ is not just an old concept but a current reality” (Davidson and Goldberg 20). The report goes on to state that “[a]ccess to computers remains unevenly distributed. In our comments about formal education, implicit is an awareness that even the most basic resources (including computers) are lacking in the nation's most impoverished public schools as well as in the nation's poorest homes” (Davidson and Goldberg 22). This claim that the digital divide remains well into the 21st century may be surprising, especially considering the vast public acceptance of a so-called Internet Generation or Generation Y. However, cultural and media critic, Siva Vaidhyanathan, supports this assertion in his essay, “Generational Myth” published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Vaidhyanathan asserts, “to assume an entire generation is ‘born digital’ willfully ignores the vast range of skills, knowledge, and experience of many segments of society. It ignores the needs and perspectives of those young people who are not socially or financially privileged. It presumes a level playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies” (“Generational Myth”).

My experience teaching at one of the country's first HBCUs confirms the cautionary words of Davidson, Goldberg, and Vaidhyanathan: these students are not “born digital,” but continue to exist on the fringes of literacy and technological. They exist in realms that lack the resources and privileges others take for granted, perhaps especially those who identify an entire generation by assuming traits perhaps only prevalent in white, middle-class, college-ready eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds. For those underprivileged young people who do enter higher education—let's not forget the majority do not—enrolling perhaps most often in two-year institutions and less privileged four-year institutions, computer classrooms continue to be difficult to come by, and even more difficult to keep serviced and up-to-date with current software and hardware. Due to financial constraints and the many needs at these institutions, they are also more unlikely to be unable to support faculty development, especially training involving Web 2.0 technologies. The result is that even students with “access” don't have the same quality of access and tools as those in more privileged college environments. Vaidhyanathan further confirms this gap in access and fluency by quoting Eszter Hargittai, sociologist and associate professor of communications studies at Northwestern University and recipient of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant to study digital communication and youth. Hargittai emphasizes this crucial connection: the groups who lack or are behind the curve in digital literacy particularly fall along the demographic fault lines of class, race, and gender (Hargittai, qtd in “Generational Myth”).

Some scholars agree that particular groups of students are left out of the digital education loop, but disagree on the enduring manifestation of a digital divide. In the essay, “New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions,” Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark, composition professors and administrators at LaGuardia Community College, state that “[w]hile in the 1980s and 1990s, much was made of ‘the digital divide,’ documenting the economic and educational injustice of access to computers, those arguments are largely erased, or forgotten, in a culture where computers are everywhere” (32). Although some might disagree that the divide has virtually disappeared, perhaps Klages and Clark make an important point when they assert that this divide has been forgotten or disguised, since universities and students are unlikely to admit their technological shortcomings. I witness the persistence of this divide daily, but perhaps never more pronounced as at the beginning of the semester, when I teach eighteen to twenty-two year olds, who are supposedly far more tech-savvy than I, how to attach files and send emails. Soon we begin to discuss the characteristics of blogs, since most of them have no idea and have never read one.

The often seemingly invisible students enter community colleges or less financially privileged four-year institutions without basic computing skills or much Web 2.0 exposure, an exposure which of course necessitates having had personal computers in their homes of origin and having attended well-funded secondary schools with the resources to expose them to multi-modal media assignments, basic fundamentals like attachments and linking text to websites. The technological moves and negotiations that are perhaps second nature to many incoming freshmen are at first quite uncomfortable for the students I teach. Smart phones and public computers have given most of them knowledge and experience in certain areas of technology, namely, the social networking landscape, although their exposure rarely extends beyond the use of Twitter and Facebook.

Klages and Clark believe the divide we should be most concerned about is not one of access, but the gap between students as consumers of media rather than competent producers of media, at least of the type we value in the academy: “Concomitant with the idea of the ‘digital native’ is the idea that all students will come to the classroom proficient in new technologies, cyber-literate, and comfortable with the discourse of digital rhetoric. But this expectation presumes of its ‘digital natives’ a literacy which they have absorbed uncritically or which they cannot produce” (Prensky, qtd in Klages and Clark 32-33). So the gap, as defined by Klages and Clark, lies in the students’ awareness of media as rhetorical acts, ones that should be critically consumed and carefully crafted. Composition instructors have long endeavored to teach students this critical awareness of consumption and production using conventional print sources and essay assignments. Klages and Clark call on instructors to apply this pedagogical track with new media.

Beginning college students in any subject usually require a breaking in period in which they are taught to be critics and interrogators of information and knowledge rather than passive, receptive consumers of information and ideology. The authors assert that the students’ ability to critique and to produce complex media products should in some ways mimic the previous attention given to initiating students into criticizing and producing complex written texts. Yet Klages and Clark most importantly encourage composition teachers to engage students in the reflective and revisionary aspects so key to the writing process that often go lost in the new world of Web 2.0, and bring these process elements into the writing and composing space of new media. They rightly assert that this loss is often due to the instant publishing capabilities of new media technologies that students are most familiar with, which are also perhaps the same tools and technologies gaining momentum in today’s classrooms, tools like blogs, websites, and social networking sites.

For Klages and Clark, basic writers’ errors have never been so glaring as they are in the instant digital publishing environments of blogs and websites: “Where in previous eras, one might argue that basic writers were almost invisible, today basic writers are often audaciously demonstrating their lack of understanding of edited American English online” (Klages and Clark 33). For Klages and Clark, the way to address this instantaneous final product and bring revision back is through eportfolios, which, when used in their classrooms retain the recursive aspects of the writing process that allow for what we hope is our students’ growing proficiency with Standard American Edited English, the language of the academy. Klages and Clark see published eportfolios as a means not only to reduce errors, but also for the students to gain self-efficacy and a growing sense of connectedness to a real audience outside of the classroom, one that often interacts with their writing through comments. This awareness of outside eyes holds the power to bring the students’ awareness to the errors present in sentence-level writing, and also stimulates them towards a larger investment: they begin to see themselves as academics, as citizens who are part of a larger community, and as writers with real voices that matter.

Klages and Clark claim that “without significant work in digital literacies, as outlined here, basic writers face double jeopardy. They will have the traditional markers and challenges of basic writers coupled with an inability to critically engage and produce in the digital medium. Just as literacy has always been linked to social, cultural, and economic power, so too does this new digital literacy mean access to our newest forms of cultural power” (48). Basic writing students have doubtlessly been stigmatized, as one’s ability to communicate in writing has historically and erroneously served as a marker of his or her intelligence and worth instead what it truly is: a sign of his access to wealth and an education rich in resources and student support. This access ultimately hinges on the socio-economic condition of one’s neighborhood, family, and school district. Computer technologies have been tied to composition instruction for at least the past decade, and so the composition instructor’s role, however over-taxed instructors may be, and most especially for those who teach in this country’s most resource-poor institutions, is to endeavor to provide students with both writing and technology skills as a means to ascend the academic, professional, and social ladder.

In the opening words of Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2009 report to the National Council of Teachers of English, “Writing in the 21st Century,” she states that the pedagogical imperative facing English teachers at all levels of education lies in “developing *new models of writing*; designing a *new curriculum* supporting those models; and creating *models for teaching* that curriculum” (1). Yancey makes the case that digital expressions in arenas like blogs and websites are simply the inevitable evolution and iteration of previous writing forms such as pen and paper and typewriters. As an iteration of writing, they should be part of any writing curriculum. However, given the unique aspects of these compositions, aspects that are far more visually and sometimes auditorily rich, as well as more socially collaborative than earlier compositions, a 21st century pedagogy will involve the academy’s revision of previous writing models, curriculums, and assessments, as well as reconsidering the very methods instructors use to teach writing.

Many scholars and professors have begun to answer Yancey’s call. Clark (2010) in “The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a 21st-Century Pedagogy” articulates the digital imperative that faces higher education composition instructors, a need that “is about transforming the classroom, moving away from the use of technology as convenient serendipity—such as the prosaic usage of PowerPoint and the occasional podcast or invocation of YouTube to add spice to a lecture—and moving toward a carefully employed pedagogy aimed at furthering students’ digital literacy, just as earlier, process-based composition emerged as a dominant pedagogical model” (28). Whereas many of us have utilized technology in the classroom for a decade or two, many scholars and educators point out that we have yet to put the consciousness and awareness we ask of our students’ writing tasks to bear on the task of creating intentional models, curriculums, and pedagogies. Furthermore, how do we bring this conscious 21st century pedagogical approach specifically to basic writers?

In the process of engaging students in new media, composition teachers need not only to engage students in creating and interacting with media, but provide them the tools with which to critique and analyze these media products, as well as the media they encounter and ingest in their day-to-day lives. It has always been part of higher education’s mission, and perhaps the humanities and cultural studies areas of higher education in particular, to teach students to be critics of their environment. In the case of writing studies, this environment has included short stories, poems, newspaper articles, academic essays, and later to advertisements, in print, audio and film. Now, the digital realm of blogs and virtually published texts has set a new stage for students to learn to critique rather than unconsciously consume. Although this self-reflective and culturally analytical model has begun to seep into basic writing instruction, many institutions continue to see basic writing classes as the stage for grammar instructions and the place for “error” correction.

In her essay, “Technologies for Transcending a Focus on Error: Blogs and Democratic Aspirations in First-Year Composition,” CUNY English Professor Cheryl C. Smith argues that blogs can be a vehicle by which to teach basic writers the complexities involved with errors and also a tool by which to transcend their lower-level status as “basic writers”. Smith goes on to state that “[a]s an online arena where error, language play, and invention are not only accommodated but actively incorporated, blogs are a surprisingly straightforward way to negotiate the tensions of error” (37). Smith’s concept of the “tension of error” is an interesting one. In fiction, of course, tension is what makes a story interesting. Although Smith doesn’t explicitly clarify what she means by this term, language “error” can certainly be an interesting sight at which cultural values and judgments are passed along or resisted. I’m not sure blogs “actively encourage” error.

Although there are certainly blogs that contain errors, the students I've taught often don't respect these as much as those that appear more polished and professional. However, Smith also states that blogs encourage language play and invention, and by doing so, blogs can open doors of discussion into the benefits and drawbacks of maintaining a personal, vernacular-driven voice in various writing situations from academic papers to blogs. Grammar rules are fairly arbitrary and very particular to cultural groups, yet we still feel justified in enforcing them in nearly all forms of writing done in the academy. Many scholars discuss the benefits of bringing student awareness to the concept of code switching, whereby, they learn to appropriately bounce from "proper" language to authentic language depending on the rhetorical situation facing them. Teaching in an HBCU, I often find myself code switching to gain credibility with my students, occasionally dropping auxiliary verbs so as not to appear too intimidating, too white, too out-of-touch.

Smith takes a similar view of error, asserting that sometimes the use of error is a necessary step in the process of making students more comfortable writers and scholars: "[B]logs create a safe place for risk-taking and error, making it less likely that students will disengage in the face of the challenging transition into college expectations" (39). Almost all of the students I teach are petrified of academic writing, so much so that a certain percentage of them freeze and never put pen to paper or fingers to keys; they are paralyzed by the fear and certainty that whatever they write will be wrong. Although these same students are initially intimidated by digital and mixed media assignments, like blogs and digital storytelling assignments, their enthusiasm and attraction outweigh this fear enough to motivate them to try to begin to compose.

The experiences gained through digital media like Facebook and Twitter have been far more positive and socially rewarding than experiences writing essays in classrooms, and students are much quicker to dip their toes into these waters and risk failure, perhaps because, at least in their eyes, the rewards have more value. Indeed, many educators and scholars have noted the widespread perception on the part of students that writing published to the Internet is more "real" and valuable to students than traditional forms of academic writing. Yancey asserts that in these digital writing contexts "there isn't a hierarchy of expert-apprentice, but rather a peer co-apprenticeship in which communicative knowledge is freely exchanged. In other words, our impulse to write is now digitized and expanded—or put differently, newly technologized, socialized, and networked" (5). Students at least perceive virtual space as a space of equality, and a less intimidating writing space than the page, and this allows them the freedom to compose and articulate more authentic and complex ideas without the fear of making personally devastating mistakes.

In keeping with the pedagogy that active reflection brings greater awareness to the learning process and therefore greater skill retention, I assign my students to write brief reflective letters following each major project sequence, whether the project is a conventional essay or a digital media assignment. Almost every reflective letter following the new media assignments attest to the student's growing confidence in his or her writing, as well as an awareness of his or her ever-present shortcomings. One student wrote, "[w]hat was different about writing a blog versus a paper? It's more freedom when creating a blog. The reason for me saying this is because it was stress free....The most difficult [thing] about the blog was really just having cited pages and making sure everything you do is not made up or fiction. But overall the blog assignment was definitely a learning experience that will stick with me for a long time." Over and over, I see this pattern: digital communication is "free" and "easy," whereas academic writing continues to be difficult and rife with indecipherable rules involving proper grammar and citation. Yet what is most significant here, I believe, is the student's authentic engagement with his own ideas and the writing process. His reflection shows a growing awareness of what he needs to do to produce a meaningful text: let his ideas manifest, keep it real, and cite it if you didn't say it.

Many of these students are more than reticent to engage in conventional essay writing, and by providing a medium that at least seems free from rules and humiliation, they are able to read and compose, engaging in complex ideas and in deciphering the schema of language that will eventually allow them to produce more complex and even virtually error-free sentences of their own. As many writing scholars have stated, perhaps since Shaughnessy, sentence-level skills develop alongside of rather than in isolation from higher order writing that involves composing authentic texts of one's own. In Smith's essay, she goes on to argue that rather than taking a corrective approach, composition instructors should transcend a focus on error to open up new sights of student learning. She states that [t]he challenge with the boundary of student ability and its inherent bumbles is learning to see error as a site for productive exploration from which to challenge students and design more effective initiatives, assignments, and activities" (39).

According to Smith and many others, by focusing on the error we stultify the writing process we endeavor to teach. Students are so paralyzed by fear of making mistakes, they don't make anything, at least anything anyone would recognize as a stepping stone to scholarship. Smith discusses Richard Miller's "Writing at the End of the World," stating that "Blogs help us, in Miller's words, '[learn] how to hear what are students are saying' so we can teach them to 'write in ways that we can hear' (48) in the academy" (Miller, qtd. in Smith 57). I too attest to the tunnel of possibility new media assignments burrow. I've seen first-hand how engaging students with media provides the venue for discussion and understanding about the aspects of academic writing that ordinarily spook basic writers and undergraduates in general. The increased exposure to writing that these assignments provide, coupled with the "freeing" effect mentioned by many of my students, lead to the students eventually penning far more successful, subsequent academic prose. Part of this is due to practice and engagement with the writing process, but the other part, I would agree, is purely psychological; the student believes s/he is a writer and can take a seat at the academic table.

Many of us have been encouraged by the potential for new media to be a force of positive social change, one that is as democratizing as it is engaging. Smith articulates this when she states, "As educators bring the new technologies into academic settings to include the purpose of advancing critical thinking for college, they will also provide fair access to knowledge-making, empowering students as cultural critics with valued opinions" (46). Klages and Clark do so when they assert "[j]ust as literacy has always been linked to social, cultural, and economic power, so too does this new digital literacy mean access to our newest forms of cultural power" (48). Davidson and Goldberg tie this potential for social change to the particularities of the way that new media works: it is collaborative and cooperative rather than hierarchical and competitive (30). They elaborate on this concept of a new writing process that connects to social and economic processes through a many-to-multitudes model: "a group that has access to resources sustains and supports the infrastructure required to engage in what are equitable *intellectual* exchanges with those who do not have the financial resources to sustain digital connection" (Davidson and Goldberg 31).

The writers stress that this model doesn't overlook the very real material factors of the underprivileged, but rather allows for increased networking and proliferation of connected ideas among group members who can then disseminate their ideas and creations to multitudes via the Internet. Yancey also emphasizes the social power of networking through an example of students rebelling against standardized AP testing by stating, "these students understand the power of networking, which they used for a collective self-sponsoring activity, in this case a kind of smart-mob action. When you have a cause, you can organize thousands of people on very short notice—and millions when you have more time" (6). Yancey's example has particular relevance right now, when more than ever our world seems to be changing shape due to the power of social networking and Internet campaigns. The Occupy Movement, a grassroots web of disparate, impassioned individuals, would never have met and inspired a national dialogue around issues of economic and social equality had it not been for networking.

I'm especially interested in the ways in which technology can provide entrance into realms previously unavailable to basic writers, one marginalized group that encircles other marginalized groups, all outsiders from traditional power structures in education and society. Engaging basic writers in technology-based composition projects allows them to opt out, however briefly, of the hierarchical knowledge-making system that continues to be sustained in many classrooms, teaching approaches, and institutions. As for long-term benefits, one hope is that writers and the institutions will recognize the value of basic writers' voices and their creative and intellectual potential. By engaging basic writers in the latest technologies, as we would expect to do with any other undergraduate student, teachers and institutions will be closer to breaking down the binaries constructed between social classes, races, college-level writers and basic writers, media and text. Perhaps, then we can move on to the next step, which American studies and technology scholar, David Nye, sees as examining not only "how technologies have been incorporated into cultures of difference, but also to prepare students to take part in the social construction of emerging technologies" (Nye, qtd in "Rewiring the 'Nation'"). By putting creative and economic power into the hands of marginalized groups via technology, we create the possibility of a new model of education, one that gives power and agency to students as knowledge makers. Once students gain the power to make knowledge, they will begin to find their way out of the stigmatized realm of basic writing, and perhaps collaborate on a collective future, one in which they are not only included, but are able to take the lead.

Notes

1. I quote from the student's work with his permission; excerpt is quoted directly from the student letter.

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