Postpedagogy and Web Writing

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Abstract

Collaborative digital tools, online communities, and the evolution of literacy create opportunities in which writing for an English class and writing for the “real” world no longer have to be two separate activities. Seizing such opportunities requires rethinking the desire to teach writing—a move toward what has been termed postpedagogy. We align the interactive and collaborative affordances of web writing with a postpedagogical model of learning focused on inventive practices grounded in kairotic interactions. We also detail our candid experiences working with students who are writing for real world audiences, as well as the productive risks and anxieties such an approach produces.

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“College Writing might not care that both the production and reception sites for texts are changing so rapidly, but the rest of the world does” (Sirc, 2010, p. 69)

“Our most egregious crime is the insistence on dumbing down the complicated process of composition to a scrupulously teachable method, reducing the roles of chance and the imagination in the production of textual knowledge” (Sirc, 2012, p. 512)

In this article, we provide both a rationale for and document our experiences with upper-division and first-year composition courses structured around web writing.¹ The exigence for our approach stems from both of Sirc’s theses: how rhetoric and composition has underestimated the extent to which technological innovation transforms writing, and still succumbs to the temptation to reduce writing to a set of simple rules and procedures. Sirc echoed Collin Brooke’s (2009) fear that writing instruction will grow increasingly irrelevant in the coming decade if it does not attune itself to the kinds of writing people are doing in the real world. We find particularly compelling Brooke’s warning that “our disciplinary insistence upon the printed page, if it persists unchecked, will slowly bring us out of step with our students, our institutions, and the broader culture of which we are a part” (p. 23). Bringing the composition classroom into step is not merely a matter of grafting new technology onto outmoded methods; rather, it requires we attend to how new technologies engender new approaches to teaching.

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¹ We use the term “web writing” because it covers a variety of online writing practices, from blogging, to discussion forums, to social networks like Facebook and Twitter, to whatever will come next. Over the seven-year history of this approach, most of the writing our students have done could safely be described as blogging. Recently, given the dearth of comments on many blogs, we have turned to social networking sites and established web forums.

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The arrival of new technologies, then, exacerbates the more fundamental, and likely more controversial, problem that Sirc (2012) identified, that “teaching writing is impossible” (p. 508). Writing is an elusive, complex practice, not the stilted activity codified by so many textbooks. The failures documented in Academically Adrift (2011) suggest to us, in our darker moments, that Brooke’s warning might already have come to pass.\textsuperscript{2} We were inspired by the enthusiasm our students had for the diverse forms of writing we were doing online, and thus developed a course dedicated to web writing.\textsuperscript{3} Web writing for us means participating in a community of similarly motivated writers engaging in a variety of writing practices. We outline a highly participatory form of engagement that encourages students to recognize, anticipate, and even contribute to emerging kairotic moments through reading, reflection, revision, and (above all) constant writing. The approach explicated in the second half of this essay required students in both first-year composition and upper-division expository writing classes to post 1,000 words of public writing a week. They examine their web writing and that of their peers during in-class workshops, cultivating a critical sense for the kinds of choices available to writers. Finally, they compose several longer pieces at key intervals throughout the semester that reflect upon their writing and the writing practices of their chosen Internet community. The goals of our web writing class are to make students write as much as possible while making that online writing the main topic of inquiry. To this extent, we agree with Sirc’s assessment of the problem (“screw teachability” and “linear reproducibility”), but not necessarily his solution (2012, p. 513, p. 517).\textsuperscript{4} He described his position in the classroom as one who has “mastered” an art (2012, p. 516), and emphasized the importance of exposing students to “genius writing” (2012, p. 516). We are less comfortable with claims to mastery or genius; this is the basis of our explication of postpedagogy.

Our solution of this problem draws more on the ecological work of Marilyn Cooper (2010), especially her recent essay “Being Linked to the Matrix.” Cooper (2010) surveyed the extent to which many disciplines are developing a networked metaphysics, predating existence upon participation in a network. Cooper called upon composition to consider how such a participatory theory could impact writing instruction. Cooper’s suspicions parallel those of Sirc; she cited the New London Group (1996), noting that:

\textquote{...as Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have pointed out, teaching a skill is not simply a matter of detailing rules, procedures, and strategies. The direct transmission model of teaching remains influential in writing pedagogy and can lead teachers to overvalue “systematic, analytic, and conscious understanding” and undervalue practice. (New London Group, p. 27)}

She further “understand[s] the acquisition of writing skills as a matter of gradual attunement of movement and perception that comes dominantly through practice, a lot of playing around with stuff” (Cooper, 2010, p. 28). She drew upon the New London Group’s manifesto that “overt instruction does not imply direct transmission, drills, and rote memorization” (1996, p. 33). Our approach to webwriting is based upon a postpedagogical emphasis on play and practice, employing a workshop model that exposes students to the range of choices writers make when responding to and engaging with audiences.

Cooper advocated an approach to writing instruction built around the concept of “design”:

\textquote{Writers are never separate from the rhetorical situation in which they write. They do not study the situation as something apart from them and create in a vacuum a text that will change the situation; instead, they fully engage in the situation and respond to it. Anne Wysocki has argued that because a design approach to creating communications ‘has been tied to the development of useful (instead of readable) objects, it tends to foster a more concrete sense of audience, purpose, and context’ and because designers tend to experiment to find what works, ‘by exploring and testing possibilities, they are more likely to develop what fits.’ (2010, p. 69)\textsuperscript{2}}

\textsuperscript{2} Arum and Roksa (2011) identified a number of causes for the limited learning demonstrated by the majority of students in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills (p. 36). They cite under-prepared and overworked students, faculty driven by increasing research expectations, and administration operating according to a business model. We believe part of the problem stems from a disconnect between writing pedagogy and students’ lived experiences.

\textsuperscript{3} This course was a follow to the successful course documented in Rivers, Weber, and Santos (2009). That course used forums dedicated to a single class theme, the course outlined below ambitiously expands the scope of that project.

\textsuperscript{4} Nor do we share his suspicion towards peer review. Below, we argue that peer review can play a central role in the development of a critical apparatus that students can bring to bear on their own writing.
Understanding writing as embodied, as biological and technological as well as social and cultural, means taking a design approach to creating texts and encouraging students to do so. (2010, p. 27)

What intrigues us here, in addition to the emphasis on the importance of engagement, is the distinction between the useful and the readable. Students are generally surprised to see that their writing can reach and even affect people who are not institutionally obligated to read it. We are interested in postpedagogical webwriting, then, as a way of situating the composition classroom in a world of living writers and writing, not within a simulated experience of imaginary audiences and hypothetical rhetorical scenarios. We are not talking about taking classroom participation online, or about building a public blog dedicated to a single class theme. Rather, we ask each individual student to locate an existing discourse community on the web and join in whatever writing practices that community values. To participate in these communities, students must develop their own strategies for invention and revision, which they then report to the class.

This may appear to require the instructor to abdicate some measure of responsibility. In Walker et al.’s (2011) “Computers and Composition 20/20: A conversation piece, or What some very smart people have to say about the future” Fred Kemp argued:

Teachers are inherently and sometimes egotistically managers of the knowledge they have dominion over. There will be a somewhat painful “letting go” of this managerial role, however, as learners increasingly need not so much a “what” to know as a “how” to know, and this shift will significantly affect the teacher’s role. (p. 330)

For us, this “letting go,” what Kemp identified as “risky business,” (In Walker et al., 2011, p. 331) was not painful as much as exhilarating, because we never considered ourselves managers, or suppliers, of knowledge in the first place. Education in the digital era means acting as architects who design learning spaces, not as suppliers delivering a product. Instructors are still responsible for the structural integrity of the classroom, for meeting institutional obligations, evaluating student work, and for helping students reflect upon their writing experiences. Furthermore, we must resist Kemp’s urge to patronize Internet discourse. For Kemp, instructors were required to tame, translate, or “make sense of” the web’s “fire hose” of “herky, jerky apparently irrational” discourse (Walker et al., 2011, p. 331). 5 Put plainly, we believe it is no more the job of the university to “fix” the Internet, than it is the job of the instructor to “fix” her students.

This article is divided into two major sections. The first section further explicates the concept of postpedagogy, highlighting its suitability to web writing. In short, postpedagogy advocates a critical and self-reflexive re-inhabiting of teacher authority and an insistence on kairotic, emergent, “risky” learning. The second section details how we have enacted such a model, in a variety of first-year and upper-division courses over the past six years. Taken together, the two sections demonstrate how writing for an English class and writing for the real world no longer have to be two separate enterprises. That boundary is now a matter of choice, rather than one of logistical necessity.

1. Offering a definition of postpedagogy

Our articulation of postpedagogy centers around giving up (school’s) control of writing, but is not necessarily “student-centered” or “decentered,” since those models often operate from a claim to have distributed power equally among students and teachers. Instead of claiming to distribute power from students to teachers, postpedagogy aims to transform the ways in which teachers inhabit the power generated by their position within an institution. In Acts of Enjoyment, Thomas Rickert (2007a) wrote:

I am looking for an ethical stance that works through the inevitability of force, one that acknowledges that pedagogy is in part always characterized by an a priori accommodation of classroom power (p. 118).

Even in the web writing class we describe below, teachers are still responsible for assigning writing a grade. There is no escaping that power dynamic. However, by placing writing in communities selected by our students, by generating assignments that call upon them to develop new theories of writing based on their own experiences, and by

5 Kemp admitted that upon reflection “the irrationality after awhile becomes recognized more as our structural prejudices than their structural disability” (In Walker et al., 2011, p. 331). However, this does not dispel the paternalistic tenor of his grudging concession; it still marks student discourse as somewhat disabled.
allowing them to contribute to the criteria by which they are evaluated, we provide students an opportunity to develop an institutionally practicable form of authority (aware of its limitations). Below we argue how constructing such an opportunity requires giving up established pedagogical and heuristic methods.

We offer our articulation of postpedagogical web writing, a writing that doesn’t claim to know in advance what writing wants (Vitanza, 2003). Put simply, an instructor cannot presume that there is one proper writing to teach, but must acknowledge that writing gathers together a diversity of practices we must accommodate. As both Brooke (2009) and Sirc (2010) suggested, digital technologies intensify the necessity for such accommodation, presenting so many new and competing writing practices that anticipating a student’s exact needs with any accuracy amounts to fortune telling. Our goal is to expose our students to the plurality of potential writings, and to guide them to select those most relevant to them. We feel this embodies the spirit of what Gregory Ulmer (1985) termed “post-педагогия,” a non-essentialist approach to learning that frames “the classroom as a place of invention rather than of reproduction” (pp. 163–164). Ulmer’s pedagogy was “a ‘lived’ relation to the ‘scene of instruction’” (1985, p. 173). In Internet Invention, Ulmer stressed that it is the responsibility of both teachers and students to invent the discursive practices necessary for electracy (2003, pp. xii–xiii), the third epoch in human communication after orality and literacy. This inventive project requires a postpedagogical disposition, lest we attempt to simply reinscribe literacy’s values onto electracy, which only ensures our irrelevance.

Postpedagogy does not deny the possibility of learning, although it does call into question the extent to which writing can be taught. In the introduction to Beyond Postprocess, Dobrin, Rice and Vastola (2011) maintained:

By postpedagogy, we do not mean writing beyond teaching, but rather a point within composition studies where new ways of thinking about writing fundamentally refuse any codifiable notion of the relationship between the writing subject and the texts it produces, as well as the ‘practical’ scholarship expected to proceed from that relationship. (p. 3–4)

Such codification may appear to demystify the writing process, to make intelligible the vast, multifarious world of writing our students will encounter. From our perspective, it eliminates all the other possibilities for what writing does mean outside of our disciplinary complex (in part a building, in part a disorder). Writing becomes solely what the instructor says it is. By presenting our students with a less programmatic writing process, in effect asking them to discover and/or invent new processes to solve a variety of new problems, we are not attempting to remystify writing so much as to acknowledge that the easily-taught, easily-evaluated prescriptivist pedagogy of the last century, with its emphasis on the academic essay and little else, has failed in every imaginable way to account for the unpredictable and ingenious new forms of writing our students encounter and participate in every day. Our postpedagogical approach to web writing has not generated a recipe for producing good writing, but has given us a blueprint for a kitchen in which good writing may happen.6

Victor Vitanza (2003) suggested how the sublime infinity of what writing could be (W-R-I-T-I-N-G) frightens many educators into reducing writing to stable, fixed, disciplinary, and teachable forms. Rather than contemplate what writing could be (all that it might want to be), pedagogues “repress, suppress, and oppress” writing, shaping according to their own libidinal desires, which Vitanza noted are commingled in the desires of the institution. In other words, the pedagogue wants to “kNOw” writing, to negatively essentialize writing, articulating one finite definition by excluding all other possible senses (Vitanza, 1997, p. 12, p. 68), thus fulfilling a fantasy of power. For our part, we wanted to resist “kNOwing” writing by developing a postpedagogical web writing class that presented writing as a plurality of communities and practices. We wanted, as much as possible, to prevent our goals and desires from eradicating any concern for a student’s desire. A postpedagogical orientation is necessary if we are to exploit the new and relevant forms of writing offered by the Internet.

Rickert (2007a) also explored the extent to which imposing values upon our students is an instinctual, libidinal desire. Pedagogy, even when it advocates for the best of intentions, is often unaware of the extent to which it is caught up in issues of power, desire, imposition, and resistance (Rickert, 2007a, pp. 172–188).7 Such issues of pedagogical

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6 To anticipate our conclusion’s discussion of risk while having a bit of fun with our metaphor, a kitchen also contains knives, by which we mean web writing contains a number of potential dangers: such as encountering hostile audiences or offending someone unintentionally. There is an element of risk inherent in our notion of web writing.

7 The OED indicates that it is not a far jump from progressive pedagogy to pedantic pedagogue (and in fact, the two are morphemes of the same Greek term for the room in ancient schoolhouses in which “attendant slaves” waited for their students to arrive).
imposition interrupt students’ abilities to explore what is important to them. In light of this problem, Rickert suggested that “[w]e might then take seriously the impossibility of knowing the areas of contention and struggle that will be most important in our students’ lives or assuming that our lines of contention will be theirs” (2007a, pp. 164–165). Rickert’s primary concern was in developing a pedagogy that retains a critical sensibility without falling into the authoritarian model indicative of many cultural studies pedagogies.

In this context, we append Rickert to read “we might take seriously the impossibility of knowing the types of writing and communities that should be most important in our students’ lives or assuming that our writing and communities should be theirs.” A core component of our web writing course involves opening spaces for students to explore many kinds of writing available on the web and determining what kinds of writing practices privileged by their online communities are best for expressing their own interests. It is absurd to suggest a traditional essay could be an effective way to interact with an online community of food bloggers, sports fans, or human rights activists, although these communities all constitute sophisticated discourses that make meaningful contributions to the lives of their participants. We aim to avoid both constructing a critical project divorced from our everyday life and communications and insisting our students inherit our disciplinary projects and problems.

Rickert’s (2007a) distinction between postpedagogical and “decentered” classrooms cautiously suggests that it is disingenuous to claim that a pedagogy can evenly distribute power between teachers and students; such a claim obfuscates the extent to which the teacher performs, on the level of daily classroom practice, institutional power (pp. 109–119). Furthermore, this obfuscation risks amplifying student cynicism, further disconnecting the gap between pedagogic desire and dwelling in the real world (Levy, 2005, p. 349, pp. 354–356). Rather than claiming to transcend power, we can situate ourselves within the institutional networks we traverse with our students. Our web writing courses enact such self-reflexivity by positioning students as the experts of a community whose standards and practices they are responsible for explaining to us. As Kemp (In Walker et al., 2011) intimated, this is a risky proposition (p. 330).

Sarah Arroyo (2005) highlighted the extent to which composition theorists tend to resist notions of risk. She argues they are invested in teaching, in which “teaching” is associated with a “fixed” set of deliverables to be passed from teacher to student and back again. A course structured around web writing embodies Arroyo’s sense of postpedagogical invention:

In other words, I am asking readers to consider letting go of the idea that when we teach writing (at any level), we are transmitting a body of knowledge resting on a solid theoretical foundation. Instead, we can encourage students (and ourselves) to participate in inventing new values and purposes for writing in an electrate apparatus. (2005, p. 694)

Arroyo (2005) noted how Vitanza, Lynn Worsham, and D. Diane Davis each identified a “will to pedagogy,” inspired by a desire to master language under the authority of the teacher (Arroyo, pp. 683–695). D. Diane Davis (2000) built out of Lacan the possibility of a postpedagogy “supposing we don’t know” (pp. 223–226), where knowing resonates with Vitanza’s concept of negative essentializing (or kNOWing) through which a being becomes defined by negating all of that which it is not (Vitanza, 1997, p. 12). Our version of web writing seeks to avoid negative essentializing by refusing to define what constitutes “proper” writing, but requiring each student to make such determinations on an ongoing basis, to explain the evolving conventions of their electrate community.

Our explication of postpedagogy, as a fundamental shift in an instructor’s authority to define writing, operates alongside a “participatory pedagogy” (Carter & Arroyo, 2011), a term Carter and Arroyo borrow from Siemens (2008), “a participatory pedagogy is one that does not fully define all curricular needs in advance of interacting with learners” (qtd. in Carter & Arroyo, 2011, p. 293). We appreciate Carter and Arroyo’s call for new pedagogies better attuned to electracy. Our class realizes this orientation by endorsing an interconnected approach to web writing. We did not begin this project with a desire to enact postpedagogy; rather, reflecting on what worked in classroom led us to recognize the importance of adopting a postpedagogical orientation to best take advantage of the practical, useful, and innovative dimensions of web writing.

2. Enacting postpedagogical web writing

In the first few weeks, we ask students to search for and identify a community in which to write, complete some basic evaluation of that community, and explore some approaches conducive to web writing. We share with students a great deal of examples of web writing and communities of web writers to give them a sense of what is conventional
and possible on the web. In our web writing class, students participate in a situated community online and a reflective community in the classroom via a workshop model.

In his article “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric,” James Porter (2009) provided a heuristic for anyone developing a course in web writing. We believe three of Porter’s heuristics are particularly suited to our postpedagogical web writing approach:

- **Distribution/Circulation** - concerning the technological publishing options for reproducing, distributing, and circulating digital information
- **Access/Accessibility** - concerning questions about audience connectedness to Internet-based information
- **Interaction** - concerning the range and types of engagement between people, between people and information encouraged or allowed by digital designs (2009, p. 208)

As to distribution and circulation, it is important to note that there are ranges of social media tools that constitute contemporary information ecologies. Simply plopping student writing up on the web fails to account for the complex systems of reputation, recommendation, and discovery that characterize today’s Internet. Furthermore, like Porter, we believe scholars need to extend discussions of accessibility beyond the availability of the technology itself (Porter, 2009, p. 220). Porter was concerned with how usage data misrepresents the Internet as culturally ubiquitous. As Adam J. Banks (2006) demonstrated, the question of mere access becomes even more problematic when one tries to account for the complexities introduced by cultural background:

The problem with the Digital Divide as a concept for addressing systematic differences in access to digital technologies is that it came to signify mere material access to computers and the Internet, and failed to hold anyone responsible for creating even the narrow material conditions it prescribed. Beyond the tools themselves, meaningful access requires users, individually and collectively, to be able to use, critique, resist, design, and change technologies in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs, rather than those of the corporations that hope to sell them. (p. 41)

To which we would respond: corporations or institutions. In our experience, students are not always the mythic “digital natives” we have been promised. We agree with scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2007), Siva Vaidhyanathan (2008), and Michael Thomas (2011) that we need to acknowledge the diverse levels of proficiency students bring to the classroom. Contemporary web writing technologies tend to be very straightforward and provide ample documentation to help novice users. Students with myriad experience levels can quickly acclimate to the technology. Tools like Blogger, Tumblr, Twitter, WordPress, or Pinterest increasingly have been designed with usability and simplicity in mind. Similarly, if an instructor is less familiar with such tools, it would not take more than a day or two to master any one of them. Last summer, a colleague with no web writing experience opted to teach a required upper-division expository writing course using our approach. He was able to learn all the requisite technologies in a few hours.

These social media tools also offer a number of built-in features that enable circulation and distribution such as follower lists, link rolls, tagging aggregators, and tools for statistical analyses. Closed, private, university-sponsored course management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard, while they include modules for “blogging,” tend to be inappropriate for this approach. From our perspective, it is important that students “own” the means of publication, not simply borrow the instructor’s or the university’s tools.

After two weeks of research, students submit to us a proposal that identifies a community of writers (8 to 10 specific people/sites) and outlines a strategy for joining that community. Moreover, this longer assignment essentially asks them to introduce their instructor to their audience, not as a generic concept or topic, but rather as a concrete network of responsive people. While a student toiling alone may find the work of a traditional composition course slightly less unpleasant for having picked their own poison, participation in a community of writers who find a given subject not only interesting, but also worthy of their free time and enthusiasm, can be infectious.

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1. It is essential to teach students circulation ecologies if one accepts Richard Lanham’s argument (2006) that we have shifted into an attention economy (p. 6–7).
2. See Wei, Zhang Zhang Wei (2010, pp. 266–267) for a more detailed description of the shortcomings of what she terms “standardized learning management systems.”
Thereafter, students are responsible for composing 1,000 words of prose a week, broken up into as many smaller compositions as the student sees fit (we generally advise three or more individual pieces so that students aren’t rushing through those 1,000 words all at once). This keeps students writing at a regular pace that encourages them to develop a habit of writing, while also forcing them to look outside their preexisting body of opinions for new material to write about. All that is asked of the student is that this writing be something that will interest the community they have selected, and that the writing be about current or recent developments within that community’s discourse.  

Beyond this, students are wholly encouraged to pursue the subject wherever it might lead, and explore new forms of writing presented by their community (top ten lists, open letters, narrative reviews, multimedia presentations, satires, etc.). From the perspective of postpedagogy, we are allowing students to participate in the articulation of what constitutes effective writing. As instructors, we can engineer such discovery and help students explore forms of writing they may not have considered by periodically asking that some portion of the students’ online writing to adhere to certain constraints that we have set.

Byron Hawk (2007) articulated a kairotic notion of invention that begins with attending to the specifics of context rather than relying on the generic deployment of pre-established “fixed” topoi (p. 127, pp. 238–240). Hawk advocated an approach to invention that:

start[s] with the structure of particular constellations and the invention of techniques for and out of those specific occasions; it is thus more attuned to co-responsibility, kairos, emergence, and ambience. Composition theorists should be striving to develop methods for situating bodies within ecological contexts in ways that reveal potential for invention, especially the invention of new techniques, that in turn reveal new modes for action within those specific rhetorical ecologies. (2007, p. 206)

The constraints we incorporate into web writing challenges students to invent fluid and kairotic techniques rather than deploying “fixed,” static, generic topical ones in response to emerging exigencies (Hawk, 2007, pp. 239–241). One favorite such constraint is the “apology,” which asks students to apologize to someone either inside or tangentially-related to their community for something. The ambiguous contours of the constraint are what mark it as ripe for kairotic invention, since students can interpret it in unexpected ways. For instance, one student, writing about high performance automobile racing, apologized to his parents for destroying their front lawn while a teenager, constantly littering the yard with engine blocks. Another particularly poignant apology came from a student teacher addressing not only her future students, but also her future family:

I’ve spent a few days mulling over my previous post about how and why I decided to become a teacher and I am becoming more and more convinced that I have made a horrible mistake. So, I would like to apologize in advance to my children and my future husband. From before the beginning of my first year of teaching they will become my unwilling guinea pigs and my moving assistants. They will be roped into moving desks and decorating classrooms, sharing their mother with hundreds of other children and spending an absurd amount of time with me during the summer. They will also likely spend those summers assisting me in the development of my tests and their weeknights grading papers. They will have to quickly come to terms with my habit of using classroom management strategies to handle family arguments, which may or may not lead to me developing a bathroom pass system to hunt down the member responsible for leaving the toilet seat up. (PseudoPen, 2011, para. 1)

Other popular constraints include “memory lane,” in which students explore the first person or event that got them interested in their community; “outsiders,” in which the students play with how identities operate across community lines; and “pet peeve,” where the students are free to either explicate on—their community’s characteristic pet peeve or one of their own that they have identified in their community. Not all constraints come from us; they can also arise from workshopping writing as well. Often a student will share a particularly humorous or inventive piece, and the other students will proceed to craft something similar for their respective audiences. Incorporating these classroom trends

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10 Often, the hardest part of this approach is getting students to invest the time in reading before writing. We often assign Graff and Birkenstein’s *They say, I say* (2010) and require students to use the bridges offered in the opening chapters in their posts.

or “memes” often enhances the sense that students are involved with the instructor in creating the content and spirit of the course.

As we hope the discussion of constraints makes clear, it is imperative to not only share student writing with the outside world, but also to workshop it within the class itself. Our classroom model borrows from scholars such as Joe Moxely (1989), Tim Mayers (2005), and Diane Donnelly (2010), all of who identified the affinities between composition and creative writing. However, we differ from these scholars in that our primary focus is not on fostering creativity (Moxely, 1989, pp. 25–26; Leaky, 2010, pp. 25–26) but rather on cultivating a critical sensibility and vocabulary for talking about writing. In our experience, a workshop approach makes student writing the focus of discussion and strengthens the sense that the students are contributing to the substance of the class. A workshop discussion generally focuses on three concerns: summarizing a work, identifying the strengths of a piece, and discussing how the piece might be improved. Generally, each class features two to three pieces of students’ web writing and operates as a discussion revolving around these concerns. The participatory nature of the workshop runs against the increasingly mechanistic experiences of many contemporary students; in terms of writing instruction a workshop approach provides a measure of “freedom from an oppressive curriculum that demands too much rote critical thinking, dry textual analysis, and academic prose strangled by thesis statements and Strunk & White correctness” (Healy, 2009, p. 32, qtd. in Donnelly, 2010, p. 13). The workshop is a very delicate machine that requires attending diligently to keeping a schedule, making sure everyone is participating, and, perhaps most importantly, restraining the impulse to kNOw writing and allowing space for students to talk out the parameters by which writing could be judged. Beyond seeing how their fellow classmates are navigating the 1,000 word-a-week requirement, or dealing with our constraints, students develop a critical eye for their peers’ writing that they can they apply to their own writing. In their final reflective piece, students often express what is found in creative writing studies, that the workshop component was the most valuable aspect of the course for them (Donnelly, 2010, pp. 3–4). We have found the workshop model the best way of approaching web writing because it seeks to make student writing, and their relationship to their audience, the center of attention.

Just as a workshop model provides immediate helpful feedback in the classroom, web writing can provide immediate, meaningful connections with a world of readers outside the classroom. Many web-writing tools include the ability to determine how many readers a particular writer or piece of writing has attracted. Regular updates to their blog also encourage readers to return. Popularity does not necessarily signal strong writing, but providing evidence that a student’s work has attracted non-captive, non-academic audiences necessarily transforms the exigency of the writing classroom, and presents a credible and useful challenge to the instructor’s monolithic position as arbiter of what is and is not desirable in writing. It would be impossible to describe the look on a student’s face when she realizes that a post she wrote the night before has had hundreds or (in one case) thousands of readers, all because the student selected an interesting topic and wrote about it in an informative, entertaining, and timely way.

One first-year student writing for a hunting and archery blog began the semester by discussing the opening of squirrel hunting season in Indiana. This was an attempt to speak to some current development within the community of hunters in which this student was writing:

At the beginning of the season it is more of a challenge to bag a squirrel because the trees are still full of leaves and there are no leaves on the ground to hear the squirrels wrestling in. It is also still hot and humid making the squirrels not very active. (huntingfever11, 2007a, para. 2)

In a traditional composition course, this would be a fairly promising draft of a descriptive expository essay. One might even be tempted to encourage the student to emphasize the more Hemingway-esque aspects of the piece, with the simplicity of its description of hunting and the repetition of the word “leaves.” The piece would be revised and eventually submitted for a grade. Chances are good that it would never be published or find an audience. In a web writing class, however, this student’s writing made an impression outside of the classroom, attracting a comment from an anonymous reader who questioned the morality of hunting in general and wondered why anyone would hunt squirrels specifically. The student chose to respond in a thoughtfully written follow-up post that contained a rationale

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12 Responding to the question of whether creative writing classes should teach commercial forms of fiction, Moxely wrote:

Ultimately our goal as teachers is not to prescribe a particular literary form. We shouldn’t, for example, teach literary fiction as if that’s all there is. If students want to write science fiction, historical novels, romance, or some other kind of commercial fiction, we should help them to realize their goals, while educating about the range of alternatives. (1989, pp. 36–37)

Obviously, our postpedagogical orientation seeks to extend this idea to all writing classrooms.
for hunting animals for food (and in some way puns the question by providing a recipe for barbecued squirrel). This alone provided the student with a sense that his writing was being read, and that he had something valuable to say on the subject of hunting. He chose to return periodically to the subject of squirrel hunting, eventually authoring one of the most widely-read posts in our experience teaching this approach, a short piece about the most effective calling devices used in squirrel hunting:

Using a squirrel call is very simple. The top rubber part on the call is called the bellow. To make the sound of a barking squirrel you simply put your finger over the hole on the bottom and pat on the bellow. If done correctly the squirrel should bark back. (huntingfever11, 2007b, para. 2)

Because of the student’s timing, his existing body of writing, and the relative lack of information on the subject, the tutorial was ranked very high by popular search engine queries for “squirrel calls,” was passed around by other hunters, and received four thousand readers in the first 24 hours of publication. The student was very satisfied with the reaction, but more than this temporary attention the student gained a sense of what writing his community valued and how his writing could best meet the needs of that community. The enthusiasm this student felt, although difficult to measure, transmitted itself to his classmates during the in-class writing workshop.

In the act of building an audience, students not only pursue popularity, but also play an active role in establishing the standards by which their writing is to be assessed. The pressure for better writing, and indeed, the parameters of what “better” entails, comes from the student’s understanding of what her community values and the ways in which she seeks to participate. As the students writes throughout the semester, the instructor is also learning about each student’s online community, and assessing how attentive the student is to the goals she has set for herself and the ways her writing might be received. In fact, assessment becomes a collaboration between student and instructor as the student reports on what she has learned or gained from the experience in a second longer paper. We negotiate new goals or approaches to writing when we see that student succeeding or struggling. Unsolicited self-assessment often emerges in their online writing. A first-year composition student who grew up training horses found a small but tightly-knit community of writers dedicated to documenting equestrian events, proper horse care, and the identification of abusive horse trainers. In a farewell post at the end of the semester, she reflected on how contributing to this community benefited her, writing that:

The thoughts and experiences that I have had throughout my life gave me the words to fill this blog. However, I never expected to gain so much back in return from what little it seemed like I had to offer to this web page. By sharing bits and pieces of my life and love for my horses, I broadened and expanded my own knowledge. (Elizabeth, 2010, para. 2)

Another student, writing under the pseudonym “existential absurdist,” in an upper division expository writing class whose project focused on joining the litblog community, concluded:

My Narration blog in particular forced me to do some introspection. I had to explain why I like Absurdist literature, and what brought me to like it. This was the hardest blog for me to write because it was about me. I don’t like writing about myself, and I feel a lot more comfortable writing objectively. Having done the narration blog, however, I learned a bit about myself, and it made me analyze further what it is that I see in such writings, and what it says about me.

I feel that after having written these blogs, I have become a better writer. Yes, I learned good writing techniques, such as using active verbs instead of passive ones, writing good first sentences, and tying in the first and last paragraphs. But I gained more than this. Over the last few weeks, I have become more analytical in my writing, more reflective and more thoughtful. (existential absurdist, 2010, para. 2–3)

These self-assessments are strongly encouraging to us, and are a sign that students are not simply performing an institutional role (the model student) but see that writing, and “good” writing, however they define it, can benefit them beyond the university.

Even if a student chooses to enter a relatively contentious community that values antagonism and bombast over support and collaboration, she still engages in the same practice of navigating the needs and desires of a community of readers and writers. For example, one group of upper-division students spent part of their semester engaging with ESPN’s SportsNation forum. Mimicking an aggressive, argumentative style of sports journalism, these students were
able to generate fairly large audiences by making strategically controversial arguments, such as a list of the 8 reasons why Lebron James is the worst player in the National Basketball Association, and one particularly contentious post in which the writer claimed that Derek Fisher had become too old to compete professionally. The post provides statistical documentation of Fisher’s perceived liabilities and ends:

To conclude, Fisher needs to retire and teach his kids how to play basketball or become a mentor for new players. Although an extremely wise player on and off the court his decision to keep playing has been the only decision that I have not agreed with. I just hope that this old man does not get in the way of another Championship ring for the Lakers. (BasketballS13, 2009, para. 3)

This was a deliberately confrontational argument, but was written with the goal of generating debate. The effort was successful, according to the goals of both the student and the instructor, eliciting twenty-nine reader comments over the course of two days. These anonymous readers agreed and disagreed with the argument the student had presented, and responded to each other, all spurred by a piece of student writing.

One of our major concerns when we began conceptualizing a course structured around web writing was the potential for negative or even harmful online interactions. Would we be exposing our students to needless dangers? While we suspected that asking students to engage with communities outside the classroom would create the kinds of positive, useful forms of risk we valued in our own online writing, we saw the potential for other risks that we as instructors felt the need to mitigate. This is why we require our students to create pseudonyms for their online identities—it is important that they remain completely anonymous for the duration of the semester. It might strike someone as odd that a pedagogy so committed to public participation mandate the use of pseudonyms. After all, isn’t ethos a matter of identity? We would respond, harkening back to Cooper (2010), that ethos isn’t an individual property, but rather a function of a network of relations; as Grabil and Pigg (2012) noted, ethos is not an essential quality as much as a performed activity, what they term “identity-in-use” (102). As Aristotle (1991) reminded us, credibility ought to be a measure of the quality of a rhetor’s thought, not her name or credentials (L11.4). Over the course of a semester, students gain experience not only in assessing the credibility of others, but also crafting a responsible and credible persona.

3. Conclusion

Risk creates anxiety. As Kemp (In Walker et al., 2011) said, leaving the boundaries and norms of the traditional classroom can be a source of anxiety for instructors just as much as it is for students. Our conjoined interest in web writing and postpedagogy springs from the positive experiences we were having as writers on the web, and from our desire to share these experiences, these upheavals, these anxieties, with our students. Knowing that ones’ writing will be scrutinized, both by unpredictable web audiences and a class full of ones’ peers, produces a great deal of anxiety. There are many kinds of anxiety, but the fear of receiving a poor grade can never approximate the kind of creative pressure that arises from struggling to make one’s writing appear interesting or intelligent to other people. Nor, in our experience, does the reward of a high grade match the satisfaction a student feels when her writing generates attention.

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13 29 comments may not sound significant, however, writing for the official blog of WordPress, an open source blogging platform, Scott Berkin (2009) revealed that across all WordPress blogs, only 1% of posts had ever generated ten or more comments, while 77% received no comments at all. To receive twenty-nine comments is no small accomplishment, even for professional web writers.

14 Convincing students to maintain their own anonymity can be difficult at times; given the overwhelming ubiquity of social media, students increasingly want to connect their web writing projects to their Facebook profiles or personal Twitter accounts. Additionally, they often want to post profile pictures of themselves. Thus far, given FERPA concerns, we have forbidden these kinds of connections—not only for obvious safety issues, but also because we are glad that no one can find anything we wrote when we were 18.

15 Jessie Blackburn (2010) offered a reflection on blogging that helps to distinguish our approach: Although blogs function as a kind of journal in my class, and I grade them as freewrites, I find that the faster, more immediate, and often shorter style that blog writing requires renders these blogs a very effective way to make concrete some of the skills students will need in high-stakes writing situations like essay exams, because they are asked to think and write quickly on issues of immediate interest. In my courses, we compose blog entries in class one draft, so blogs have a different effect than essays composed outside of the classroom without the pressure of timed writing. The instant publishing feature of blogs, however, makes blogs one of the highest stakes (although graded as low stakes) forms of writing that my students do; in a single click, they become authors with the responsibility for what they have written. (p. 34) Our postpedagogical web writing course taps into the anxiety and investment Blackburn (2010) identifies; where she sees it as a positive, but supplementary, component of web writing, we believe it to be central to learning how to write.
from an audience. Postpedagogy does not attempt to eliminate either teacher or student anxiety as much as to exploit it to create as productive and instructive an environment as possible.

What both instructors and students gain from a postpedagogical web writing class is the freedom to actively pursue their own investments and cope with the attendant risks. They gain the confidence to enter a new discourse community, get a sense of its conventions, and invent new writing practices when *kairotically* called for. As writers we hope for what, as teachers, we can never guarantee: that these courses expose students to the exhilaration of writing and being read, to become writers who want to write. And, while we hope that they have such experiences, and work hard to construct conditions in which they are possible, we also stress that no amount of work can ensure that they will unfold.  

We do not claim to have transcended the issues of teaching, power, and libidinal desire highlighted by Vitanza (2003), Rickert (2007a), Arroyo (2005) and others. Rather, we simply want to stress that we don’t know precisely what writing should or could be, and we want our students’ help in discovering possibilities situated in the real, evolving contexts of the everyday world.

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Both Marc and Mark are more than to discuss this model with interested parties and can be reached via email at marcsantos@usf.edu or markleary@usf.edu.

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16 Dobrin, Rice and Vastola (2011) argued that post-process, post-post-process, and what we call post-pedagogy can be framed as “an ethical and practical response to the ideological push for educational accountability” (2). Perhaps the largest hurdle facing a postpedagogical web writing class is its inherent oppositions to the rising tide of empirical assessment and rigid outcomes. See also Robinson (2010) for a critique of the factory approach to education.


