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2010-03-11

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Public Spheres, Democracy, and New Media:  
Using Blogs in the Composition Classroom

by

Katherine Elizabeth Cowley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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April 2010

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## ABSTRACT

Public Spheres, Democracy, and New Media:

Using Blogs in the Composition Classroom

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Master of Arts

Public spheres theories provide purpose and direction to composition instruction: the teaching of writing within this context empowers our students to participate in public discourse and make a difference in communities. New media has been celebrated for its democratic nature, and composition instructors have begun to use public spheres theories as they incorporate new media in the classroom to create a protopublic space. Yet most composition instructors have ignored the wealth of evidence that shows that the Internet is not as democratic as it seems. As such, our new media teaching practices should account for both the democratic opportunities and failures of the Internet. By using examples from my own classroom, I demonstrate how blogs can be used within the composition classroom by focusing on public spheres oriented teaching practices and methods. Four specific pedagogical approaches which instructors can incorporate are discussed: embracing the small-scale, counterpublic, and private potential of the blog; teaching students rhetorical skills which enable them to contribute more meaningfully to online conversations; teaching aspects of online infrastructure and distribution; and consciously using Habermas' criteria of public spheres to construct an online public community of class members. By using new media in the composition classroom, teachers can promote civic virtues within our students, support democracy, and positively transform the Internet's public space.

Keywords: new media, composition, blogs, public spheres, Internet, democracy, teaching

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Brian Jackson for the hours he spent mentoring me and helping make my thesis the best it could be. I would also like to thank Kristine Hansen and Gary Hatch for their thoughts and insights which guided the evolution of my thesis.

I would also like to thank my husband for his support throughout this entire process, and my mom for reading all of my papers, including this thesis, before I'd let anyone else see them. Finally, I appreciate the constant support of Gideon Burton, to whom I owe most of the good ideas I've had about new media.

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## Introduction

Over the last decade it has become commonplace to argue that we need to use new media in the composition classroom. For as Jeff Rice writes, new media writing is the rhetoric of cool. Many herald the ways in which new media can be used in the classroom (Yancey; Herrington), often focusing on student engagement and new media parallels to traditional rhetorical principles. Scholars have classified the attributes of new media rhetoric and “new media language” (Rice; Lanham; Manovich; Murray), considered the technological and institutional infrastructures necessary for using new media in the classroom (DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill), proposed new methods of evaluation (Penrod), and created sample, new media lesson plans (Wysocki et. al.). Some have proposed video, audio, and other multimodal text creation in the classroom, and detailed how to do so (Burn; Jewitt and Kress; Selfe). Others have proposed “low bridge” implementation approaches for using new media in the classroom (Anderson). And a recent, comprehensive study found that interactive use of new media enhances student learning for higher order skills by 32% for the average student (Cisco 13).

With all of the literature on new media and the constant appeals to incorporating new media into teaching, it’s hard to decide, as an individual instructor, how to actually *use* new media in the classroom. What are we trying to teach our students by using blogs, constructing web pages, making YouTube videos, and participating in Second Life? What learning outcomes do we fulfill by having our students reduce *Hamlet* to ten 140-character tweets? What are our students learning to write when we spend a class period on how to use Photoshop? And how do we choose between the plethora of new media-composition options? In an article on “the future of writing programs,” Catherine Gouge reminds us that as we incorporate technology and new

media into the classroom, we must “keep in mind one relatively simple equation: our programs should be structured such that they reinforce what we are trying to teach students who participate in the programs” (231). This must be the measuring stick by which we gauge our use of new media in the classroom: more than simply using new media to engage students in the material, we must consider how new media can best help our students learn what we are trying to teach.

While there is value in writing for the self, writing as learning and growth, and writing as entertainment, one of the primary strengths of writing is that we use it to communicate, to make change or provide insight, in real situations with real consequences. From this viewpoint, we teach our students to write not only so they can get an A on a college research paper, but also so they can be more effective citizens of their country and the world, and better able to contribute as members of communities. This is not our only task, but it is perhaps the way that we can have the most lasting and powerful impact on our students. Building on public spheres theorists (including Dewey and Habermas), in 1999 Rosa Eberly argued that the composition classroom can be a protopublic space in which students participate in “public discourse...by thinking, talking, and writing about and for different publics” (172). The protopublic classroom is one in which “students...see themselves as actors in different and overlapping publics [which] can help them realize the particular and situated nature of rhetoric and the need for effective writing to respond to particular needs of particular publics at particular times” (Eberly 167). By making the classroom a protopublic space, students better learn the situated nature of communication and are better prepared to communicate in the real contexts they will face in the future.

Now that the Web has become one of the primary vehicles for political and community discourse, protopublic spaces can be created through incorporating new media into the classroom. Scholars in composition and rhetoric have begun to advocate for this use of new

media. Over the last decade and a half, scholars have begun to apply Internet public spheres theories to the composition classroom (Ward; Yancey; Lowe and Williams; Fernheimer and Nelson; Simmons and Grabill; Warnick). This paper will expand on the work of these scholars, particularly that of Lowe and Williams and Fernheimer and Nelson, who focus specifically on the blog genre. Blogs (an abbreviation for weblogs) have been widely acclaimed as a democratic medium through which all members of society can participate in public debate. Yet while many have recognized the World Wide Web, and in specific blogs, for their democratic potential, many scholars are quick to point out that the Internet is not as democratic as it initially seems (Sunstein; Hindman; Scott; Schuler; Baoill). Blogs, for example, require large investments of time in order to gain readership and actually contribute to the public sphere. Some studies have even shown that the Internet may actually be no more democratic than traditional forms of publishing because most people who attempt to contribute to online conversations remain unheard (Hindman).

While their work has provided a great foundation for how to use new media in the classroom, most composition scholars with public-oriented teaching goals do not address the democratic shortcomings of the Web. In both my first year composition and advanced writing classrooms, I have attempted to use blog participation to create a protopublic classroom space, a space which takes advantage of online democratic potential while recognizing the Internet's shortcomings and democratic failings. By using examples from my own classroom, in this paper I will argue that while we should not blindly accept the democratic potential of new media, the blog genre in particular can still be productively used in the composition classroom to facilitate a protopublic space, as long as instructors consciously tap into the blog's potential through public-oriented teaching practices and methods. As composition instructors, we can encourage our

students to get involved in civic matters. Further, we can transform the Internet's public space, promoting civic virtue by making the Internet more democratic, discursive, and focused on the individual voice.

#### New Media, the Public Spheres Debate and the Composition Classroom

There is a long tradition of applying public spheres theories to the composition classroom. This tradition is described in great detail by Christian Weisser in his book *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, so his work will not be replicated here. Suffice it to say that over past decades our discipline has seen a definitive "move toward public writing" (1). Weisser explains how this benefits students, including "help[ing] students see the value of adopting a particular rhetorical stance" and teaching students about how the style, stance, and form of writing affect a text's persuasiveness for an audience (92). Most important, for Weisser, is that using a public approach in the classroom "gives student writing real significance; public writing often allows students to produce meaningful discourse that has the potential to change their lives and the lives of others" (91). This same public-oriented mentality permeates the NCTE guidelines on "Teaching Composition," adopted in 1985: "Writing is a powerful instrument of thought. In the act of composing, writers learn about themselves and their world and communicate their insights to others. Writing confers the power to grow personally and to effect change in the world."

Public spheres theories give a clear direction and purpose for our work as compositionists. We can, as Rosa Eberly posits, turn our classrooms into protopublic spaces, in which "students can practice public discourse...by thinking, talking, and writing about and for different publics" (172). The application of these theories to new media is a logical choice for our profession and would follow Catherine Gouge's advice to first understand the goals of our

classroom, and then keep these goals in mind as we incorporate new, technologically-based elements into our classrooms. One of the things which excites compositionists about the Internet is that it's much easier for students to participate in real public conversations and to make meaningful contributions. Students can write a blog, contribute to online forums, and participate in online publics—all with the click of a mouse. Further, as much of public discussion and decision-making moves online and into technology-based media, new media literacy may be necessary for individuals to even participate in publics. Simmons and Grabill argue this point in their 2007 *CCC* article: “The spaces in which public deliberation most often takes place are institutionally, technologically, and scientifically complex...in order to participate, citizens must be able to invent valued knowledge” which “requires using complex information technologies...to access, assemble, ...analyze...[and] produce” knowledge and arguments (419). If we hope that our students will participate in public spheres, we must equip them with the new language, the new forms, and perhaps even a new rhetoric of new media.

Yet recent research—performed by dozens of political scientists and rhetoricians—clearly demonstrates that the hype about Internet democracy is largely undeserved. Matthew Hindman goes so far as to title his book on the subject *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. (Prior to his research Hindman planned to take a neutral look at Internet democracy, a plan which changed on analyzing the research he and others found.) If digital democracy is a myth (a claim that will be discussed in more detail later in this paper), some would argue that it is not worth our time to try to create a protopublic classroom through use of new media. But it is possible to reconcile the Internet's democratic potential, particularly for the classroom, with the depressing reality of failed cyberdemocracy. In order to do so, we must first return to two of the public spheres theorists that provide the foundation for the work of composition and rhetoric scholars: John Dewey and

Jürgen Habermas. Both offer insight into why we need public spheres and what a true public sphere should look like, insight that must inform our new media teaching practices if we are to incorporate new media into our classrooms.

First, what is a public? For Dewey, there are two main types of human actions: private ones, which “affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction,” and public ones, “which affect others beyond those immediately concerned” (12). For Dewey, the second type of action—action that affects a community or group more broadly—creates the need for organized publics. For example, if Jon steals his sister’s candy bar, that is a private action, primarily affecting Jon and his sister. However, if Jon robs a store, this is potentially a public problem, affecting prices of merchandise for everyone, impacting store security, and creating a need for laws and regulations against shoplifting. According to Dewey, in a public, then, “all modes of associated behavior may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them” (27). These “consequences have to be taken care of, looked out for” (27). In other words, one of the primary goals of a public, a particular type of community, is to make decisions on things that affect communities generally.

The very idea of a democratic government relies on the premise that an informed group of normal citizens can use their reason, participate, govern, make decisions, and elect officials. Being able to vote, however, is not enough: in forming and sustaining a public, Dewey posits that communication—discourse—is essential. Dewey asserts: “Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained” (218). This communicative, discursive function of the public does not mean that everyone agrees; in fact, complete consensus is often indicative of that which is not democratic. Invariably in a democracy, and in the publics which support that democracy, there will be

disagreements. The alternative? We either have democracy, where the public is aware and involved and engages in disagreement, or, as Dewey explains, “rule by those intellectually qualified, by expert intellectuals” (205). In other words, rule by despots. Having a democratic institution is not enough to sustain democracy—publics must participate and be involved, or other forms of government will naturally develop.

Jürgen Habermas’ text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* offers a useful parallel to Dewey’s theories, particularly as we apply an understanding of public spheres to online discourse. Nancy Fraser and Gerard Hauser, among others, have called Habermas’ theories into question, critiquing their insistence on universal reasonableness—that claims can be made that should convince everyone and that “social inequalities in deliberation” can simply be bracketed in order for participants to “[proceed] as if they don’t exist when they do” (Fraser 64). Rather than rejecting Habermas entirely, these scholars propose a modified version of Habermas, within what Hauser labels “reticulate public spheres”—smaller, constituted public spheres that have their own local norms of reasonableness (Hauser, *Vernacular* 37-81). Fraser demonstrates that this “multiplicity of publics is preferable to a single public sphere both in stratified societies and egalitarian societies” and that we should seek for “the elimination...of social inequality” (77). Fraser and Hauser seek to improve Habermas’ theories, but not discard them—something we as teachers should also do as we apply them to online discourse.

Habermas presents three useful criteria he sees as necessary for the development and sustaining of public spheres: social leveling, common concerns, and accessibility. For the first criterion, social leveling, Habermas explains that the social interaction of a public sphere “[disregards] status altogether...[replacing] the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals” (36). Rich and poor should be able to come together and have their views recognized for their

own merits, regardless of the speaker's social status. This social leveling creates a great sense of equality, which Habermas celebrates: "The parity on whose basis alone the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy and in the end can carry the day meant, in the thought of the day, the parity of 'common humanity'" (36).

The second criterion, common concerns, mandates that the issues discussed must be public problems rather than private ones. Gerard Hauser adds insight into Habermas and Dewey's definitions of "public" problems, explaining that what is deemed a private or public problem can change over time, and is dependent upon how the community defines the problem. Hauser gives alcoholism as an example. Alcoholism shifted from a private problem to a church-owned problem to a public medical problem (*Introduction* 79). Basically, the problems discussed must be seen by the community as ones that impact the community at large.

In his third criterion, Habermas offers further insight into common concerns, detailing that the "domain of 'common concern' which was the object of public critical attention" must be "generally accessible" (36). Thus, for this criterion to be fulfilled, the concern must not only deal with a public problem but there must also be access by the members of the public to complete information about the problem so they can form educated arguments. Not only must social leveling occur, but also accessibility: all members of the public should be able to "avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion" (37).

When we consider the theories of Habermas, while taking into account the corrections and qualifications made by modern rhetoric and composition theorists, we have a measuring stick for what the Internet should do if it is to facilitate public spheres. From an initial glance, it seems that Habermas' three criteria are met by new media. The Internet allows people from all social backgrounds to participate in online conversations. Common concerns of communities can

be addressed. And everyone has access to countless pieces of information about almost any topic imaginable. In her text *Rhetoric Online*, Barbara Warnick makes a similar claim, proposing that the Internet offers advantages for public discourse over traditional mass media, including “affordability, access, opportunities for horizontal communication and interactivity, online forums for discussion and mobilization, networking capacity, and platforms for multimedia” (6). In considering a case study of cyberadvocacy in California, scholars William Dutton and Wan-Ying Lin concluded that the Internet acts as one of multiple media channels for advocacy, allowing individuals to bypass traditional “gatekeepers” and reach people through alternate channels, while breaking traditional geographic boundaries of community organization and action.

Other anecdotal examples are upheld as proof of the Internet as a medium for the public sphere. Barbara Warnick describes three cases in which the Internet acted as an instrument of the public sphere: post 9-11 information sharing and activism, Greenpeace’s efforts to use online environmental activism, and Howard Dean’s bottom-up Internet campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination (8-12). In Madison, Wisconsin, a school board referendum was passed, due largely to public involvement online (Friedland and Long). More recently, the Obama campaign for president relied heavily on grassroots, Internet-based discussion and mobilization. Also during the 2008 election, CNN held YouTube debates, in which ordinary citizens across America submitted video questions online, which were then answered by the candidates.

With all these examples of successful public and community-oriented action online, it is little wonder that composition has embraced the Internet as the new way to constitute public spheres in the classroom. In 2004, Kathleen Yancey asserted that we should use new media in

the classroom as a way to combine the writing that happens in the classroom with the writing on the World Wide Web. For Yancey, one of our primary goals should be “the creation of thoughtful, informed, technologically adept writing publics” (308). Also in 2004, the CCCC released a position statement on “Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments” (CCCC). This statement turns the focus towards publics, declaring that all composition courses that incorporate digital elements should “provide students with opportunities to apply digital technologies to solve substantial problems common to the academic, professional, civic, and/or personal realm of their lives.”

#### Blogs and the Debate on their Democratic Nature

While the Internet inherently has democratic potential, some forms of discourse used on the Internet seem intrinsically suited to our democratic ideals. Mark Federman interprets the particular appeal of the blog: “Unlike normal conversation that is essentially private but interactive, and unlike broadcast that is inherently not interactive but public, blogging is interactive, public and, of course, networked—that is to say, interconnected” (qtd. in Lowe and Williams). Yet most compositionists that advocate the incorporation of the Internet in the classroom, often through the use of blogs, have not addressed its flaws as a democratic medium. Much of the time (if not most of the time) democracy doesn’t happen on the Web, a fact that is honestly rather depressing for instructors attempting to use new media in the classroom to help students engage in public spheres. Luckily for us as teachers, we can empower our students with the skills necessary to truly participate in online public debate, and we can promote civic virtues, such as participation and back-and-forth conversation with opposing viewpoints.

One major critique of the Internet is that even in this age when almost anyone can publish online, people overwhelmingly turn to the big media conglomerates for their news, opinions, and

ideas, a trend which often excludes individual voices from influencing public debate. In *The Myth of Digital Democracy* Hindman asserts, “The extreme ‘openness’ of the Internet has fueled the creation of new political elites” (4). Instead of being excluded from the creation and production of information, individuals are excluded through the filtering of information, which determines who and what is read (Hindman 13). Search engines give good spots to articles, blogs, and websites based on how many people link to the page. Hindman states, “The top ten newspapers receive 19 percent of the nation’s newspaper circulation, and the top ten magazines receive 27 percent of magazine circulation. By comparison, the top ten Web sites receive 26 percent of all Web traffic; within news and media sites, 29 percent of traffic goes to the top ten outlets” (93). From these statistics, it’s clear that the Internet is no more inherently democratic than other previous media.

Yet just as democratic failings have not halted democratic participation in traditional media, the existence of new political elites on the Internet does not prevent new media forms from being used by involved individuals in matters of public debate. The concern is that easy online publishing genres do not ensure participation in public debate. For as Hindman writes, “No democratic theorist expects citizens’ voices to be considered exactly equally, but all would agree that pluralism fails whenever vast swaths of the public are systematically unheard in civic debates” (12). Yet by teaching students how to effectively use genres like the blog to engage in public debates, we can ensure that our students will not be those who are systematically unheard in online debates.

The basic, standard form of the blog includes posts made over time, either by an individual or a group of individuals. These posts build on each other and contradict each other, exploring ideas and interacting with the arguments of others. In the introduction to *Into the*

*Blogosphere*, an online peer-reviewed article collection, the editors write, “We find value in the power of blogs to forego the institutionalization of communicative practices and offer spaces for writing that are more collaboratively constructed than other online spaces, as bloggers freely link to, comment on, and augment each other’s content” (Gurak et. al.). Through hyperlinks to other entries, blogs, and sites, blog posts build on the ideas of others. Through enabling comments, readers respond directly with opinions, creating an evolving dialogue between reader and writer.

While blogs can be powerful public tools, we must admit their democratic weaknesses, a topic that Sunstein specifically addresses in *Republic.com 2.0*. While one of the main accolades for blogs is allowing for wide-spread information and fact-checking, Sunstein maintains that “one of the undeniable effects of blogs is to spread misunderstandings and mistakes” (143). Another accolade for the blogosphere, extolled by many, is that it “operates as a kind of gigantic town meeting, in a way that fits well with the claims of those who speak of the operation of the well-functioning public sphere” (139). Sunstein counters that while it may be more public and inclusive than other media, what often occurs is the echo chamber effect, where people hear only what they want to hear and turn to blogs to reaffirm and fuel their own beliefs (145). Further, there is a huge amount of polarization on blogs, as on much of the Internet. Sunstein affirms, “unfortunately, there is... good evidence that many bloggers are mostly linking to like-minded others—and that when they link to opinions that diverge from their own, it is often to cast ridicule and scorn on them” (148). For example, one 2004 study showed that in 1400 blogs, “91 percent of the links are to like-minded sites,” whether conservative or liberal (149). Another study found that “only a quarter of cross-ideological posts involve genuine substantive discussion...Real deliberation is often occurring within established points of view, but only infrequently across them” (149). Yet in our roles as teachers and mentors, we can consciously

stimulate deliberation not just within points of view, but also across them. We can model ideal public debate, and use our classroom blogs to help our students approach and interact with cross-ideological views held by other class members.

Other complaints about democratic failings of blogs can also be circumvented by skilled teachers. The online Urban Dictionary (which through its voting system is actually somewhat democratic) defines the blog with a critique, focusing on how blogs commonly do not address public issues and concerns. The popular definition for a blog, voted up by 2,738 users and voted down by 511 users, defines it as “a meandering, blatantly uninteresting online diary that gives the author the illusion that people are interested in their stupid, pathetic life. Consists of such riveting entries as ‘homework sucks’ and ‘I slept until noon today’” (NGX). This definition makes a valid complaint (as manifest by the near 3,000 members who confirmed it)—a lot of what happens on blogs does not contribute very much to the World Wide Web, and is probably not interesting or relevant to more than a handful of close family and friends. And even if blogs do discuss public concerns, they’re often not even informed by the countless resources accessible through the Internet. As teachers, we can encourage our students to write on public topics, and teach them to write in informed ways that establish their credibility and influence an audience.

Other critiques of blogs have more scholarly weight than Urban Dictionary but tend to focus on similar principles, for example in D. Travers Scott’s article, “The Tempest of the Blogosphere,” and Doug Schuler’s article, “Reports of the Close Relationship between Democracy and the Internet May Have Been Exaggerated.” Scott describes what he calls “blogflops” and Schuler describes the shortcomings of democracy online. In his 2004 article, “Weblogs and the Public Sphere,” Andrew Baoill analyzes how blogs fall short of Habermas’ requirements for a public. His critique provides a more recent parallel to Irene Ward’s 1997

article, “How Democratic Can We Get,” which also scrutinizes the Internet using Habermas’ categories, focusing on problems with Internet access and the lack of extended discussion found on the Web. Baoill argues that blogs are not truly inclusive—to actually become engaged in public debate requires a large time commitment because of what it takes to “build reputation and integrate oneself into online debate.” In other words, there is closed access. Further, “the influence of personal networks and of an A-list of bloggers in shaping who gains future attention is problematic, as is an inability of current generations of reading and ranking technologies, such as search engines, to take account of negative appraisals of sites to which one links.” In other words, social leveling does not always occur, and individuals are not always judged by the merits of their arguments. And finally, “Geographically-bound issues are less likely to gain ground than those with a general appeal.” Some publics are more welcome to the online arena than others.

Yet despite Baoill’s complaints, blogs have the potential to fulfill Habermas’ categories. As Barbara Warnick writes, building on the work of Matthew D. Barton, unlike many of the forms on the Web that require high technical expertise and large time commitments for involvement, blogs (along with discussion boards and wikis) “are simple to use, egalitarian in structure, and designed to encourage users to engage in public discussion” (17). Anyone can start a blog as long they have Internet access; dozens of large Internet sites (like Google) offer free blogs with customizable templates. With 15 or 20 minutes of setup, you can start broadcasting your opinions to the world, participating in community discussions.

In their 2004 article “Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom,” Charles Lowe and Terra Williams explore the blog as a public tool, focusing on its roots in process pedagogy, collaborative learning, private journal writing, peer dialogue journals, and peer review. In their 2005 article “Bridging the Composition Divide: Blog Pedagogy and the Potential

for Agonistic Classrooms,” Fernheimer and Nelson explore the expressivist/post-process divide in our discipline, the reconfiguring of public and private spaces through blogs, and the pedagogy necessary to create true discourse and debate through use of a class blog. Both articles offer practical and theoretical advice to take advantage of the best of the blog medium in the classroom.

There are valid concerns about the Internet’s democratic potential, and Hindman, Sunstein, and the other researchers who’ve put forth these concerns are absolutely and completely right. The Internet is not as democratic as many initially thought it would be, something we should take into account as we consider the best approaches to use new media in the classroom. Yet the excitement of compositionists who have used blogs in their classrooms (Lowe and Williams; Fernheimer and Nelson) should not be ignored—blogs truly have democratic potential, a potential that must be considered before we reject the public potential of the Internet for our classrooms.

As individual instructors, we can’t instantly make the Web, as a whole, more democratic. We can’t change search engine algorithms or force people to post informed arguments. But we can influence what happens in our own classrooms. We can use the advantages of the technology to help our students participate in discourse, to model deliberative ideals and help influence the evolution of blogs. For while Sunstein refuses “to celebrate blogs as an incarnation of deliberative ideals,” he admits that “we are better off with blogs than without them” (146). As compositionists, as we work around the shortcomings of blogs in our individual classrooms to involve our students in public spheres, we ultimately will make the Internet more democratic, more deliberative and responsive, more accepting of the viewpoints of individuals, and better able to cross ideological lines to come to public agreement.

### Recovering the Blog through Public-Oriented Teaching Practices and Methods

The reality that digital democracy is largely a myth (although there are compelling individual examples in which online organization and discussion does happen) does not negate the fact that the forms, structures, and accessibility of the Internet give it great democratic potential. In fact, seeing the failures and shortcomings of Internet democracy can help instructors maintain a realistic vision of what new media can accomplish in the classroom as well as construct new media assignments, such as blog assignments, in ways that extend the protopublic classroom space beyond the classroom walls. I will explore four pedagogical approaches to using blogs in the classroom that account for both the democratic failures and democratic potential of the Internet: first, embracing the small-scale, counterpublic, and private potential of the blog; second, teaching students rhetorical skills which enable them to contribute more meaningfully to online conversations; third, teaching aspects of online infrastructure and distribution; and fourth, consciously using Habermas' criteria to construct an online public community of class members.

The first approach is to accept as teachers the fact that our students are not likely to be heard on a large scale. (And in classes where students are graded based on how many subscribers or comments they receive, the resultant readers are often largely composed of friends and family members doing a personal favor.) Yet being heard on even a small scale can still make a difference, and may be worth the efforts of both teachers and students. For instance, blogs may have more potential on a local rather than a national scale, whether in the political realm or other realms. Sometimes the resulting community of listeners largely consists of like-minded individuals, or discusses issues that are not publicly held by all the members of a community. Yet this sort of "counterpublic," as it has been called, serves as a good training ground for publics. Weisser asserts that in counterpublics, "students often find that they can generate

effective public discourse in a climate that is supportive and nurturing, which prepares them to enter larger public debates in the future” (Weisser 107). If discourse and debate occurs—even if limited in comparison to the larger spectrum—it can be a worthwhile learning experience.

In a similar manner, the extremely personal nature of the blogosphere—in which content so private may exclude a blog from the discussion of a public or community—can also be used advantageously. The personal nature of blogs, while criticized, may be one of their greatest strengths and the way they can best succeed, both in gaining an audience and in helping our students. Barbara Warnick explains, building on scholar Matthew D. Barton, that blogs “are comprised of personal musings and opinions, and [. . .] ‘one of the primary functions of personal blogging is the development of subjectivity’ [. . .], by which, he means a sense of oneself as someone who has valuable opinions, something to say, and preparedness to engage in advocacy and discussion with other people” (Warnick 18). While a class blog assignment could easily err on the side of being too personal, when the blog space is a place where personal opinion and argument are valued and developed, students feel empowered and are motivated to discover how to be more persuasive. By accepting and even embracing the small-scale, counterpublic, and even sometimes private nature of the blog, we can empower our students, especially, as Simmons and Grabill illustrate, at a time when all civic places become more technologically and scientifically complex.

The second pedagogical approach for using blogs in the classroom is to do what we do best by teaching our students to write well. Many times blogs are not read simply because of the blogger’s poor rhetorical skills. In his article, “Tempests of the Blogosphere,” Scott observed a few influential blogs and many of what he calls “blogflops.” The difference between the two seemed to be that the influential blogs used powerful storytelling techniques while the

“blogflops,” even when speaking about important matters, did not use these basic storytelling techniques (286-91). The basic storytelling techniques Scott references are less about narrative forms than rhetorical principles. In this sense, the fundamental principles of composition and rhetoric will help us teach our students to be more persuasive on the Web.

A third pedagogical approach admits that due to the undemocratic sorting and search mechanisms on the Web, we are obligated, at least to some extent, to teach aspects of infrastructure and distribution. Jody Shipka asserts that we must teach our students to have a “greater awareness of the ways systems of delivery, reception, and circulation shape (and take shape from) the means and modes of production” (278). Through understanding blog distribution, how to connect to other bloggers on the Web, and perhaps even the basics of visibility and search engine optimization (tools that help one show up higher in the search engine findings), we can help our students reach at least part of their actual target audience. Further research needs to be performed on how this should be accomplished within rhetoric and composition.

As a fourth and final pedagogical approach, we can return to Habermas’ criteria for what a public should look like and use these as criteria for incorporating new media effectively in the classroom. These principles may not inherently be a part of the Internet or of blogs (Baoill, Hindman, etc.), but they can be a part of a classroom’s use of new media.

In order to create Habermas’ first requirement of a public, social leveling, a teacher has to set up a climate where everyone’s opinion is valued. This can be stimulated by everyone’s ideas being valued and shared in class, through practicing constructive feedback in class, talking about giving useful comments, and over the first few blog posts, highlighting examples of good comments. Teachers can set up the rules of the discourse community and what can be considered

acceptable and unacceptable interaction through the syllabus, assignment sheet and response to students. In their excellent article on blog pedagogy, Fernheimer and Nelson outline in great detail how to set up positive interactions: “For such virtual class space to work, it must be a public space governed by rules...rules that make the classroom a space where students feel comfortable enough to speak, to vacillate, to change their minds based on the better argument” (17). One way I have enacted Fernheimer and Nelson’s recommendations is through requiring students to comment on each other’s blog posts and also to respond to the comments of others. In the first several weeks, I try to give students occasional feedback on their comments; once they’ve learned the comment conventions of our blogging discourse community, I can take a hands-off approach and students continue to interact in productive ways. Through the reading and writing of blogs, students learn both to argue and to listen, and begin to understand the meaning of true discourse. Further, I make sure that the blog assignment lasts over the course of an entire unit or semester because an online discourse community cannot be realized in a few days or weeks. Students come to understand that in order to have public discourse in which everyone’s opinion is valued for its own merits, there must be prolonged interaction within the community.

Habermas’ second requirement for a public is that it discusses issues of common concern to the community. A teacher can encourage (or require) students to write about issues that matter to the students as a public and perhaps to communities at large. These can be close to home—on the college campus—or on a national scale, but they should affect the students. Nancy Fraser’s critique of Habermas offers useful insight. She writes, “A tenable conception of the public sphere would countenance not the exclusion, but the inclusion, of interests and issues that bourgeois masculinist ideology labels ‘private’ and treats as inadmissible” (Fraser 77). As teachers help

students participate in public debate, it may be more important for students to engage in discussions on the common concerns of actual communities that they have ownership in—for example, a video gaming community, a community of individuals interested in Shakespeare, or a community interested in applied physics—than to participate only in officially “public” and political problems and concerns. The key is that assignments ask students to write about things that truly matter to a community targeted by the blog, whether it’s a class community or an online cooking community.

Habermas’ third requirement for a public is access. Teachers must recognize that despite the fact that *everyone* seems to be proficient at computer usage, the digital divide exists for our students, especially for some students from disadvantaged economic and social backgrounds (Margolis). Every campus probably has open computer labs which give all the students physical access to computers, but teachers must also make sure to give students the skills to advantageously utilize the programs on the computers. I always try to spend one of the first days of class in a computer lab; we set up the blog in class and everyone does a sample post and practice comments. Students help each other and I help them; by the end of the class period, everyone is at least minimally proficient in the technology. If scheduling a computer classroom is not an option, teachers should find another way to make sure that all students are given the tools to succeed at the blog assignment, whether through giving a class demonstration, pointing students to free online tutorials, or letting students know they can come to office hours to get help setting up the blog. In addition to making sure students have the know-how to not just access but fully utilize the blog form (including inserting pictures and hyperlinks), teachers should also teach students how to research, thus giving them better access to the information they’ll need to make critical, informed arguments.

By consciously implementing Habermas' criteria for publics into the classroom, teaching aspects of online infrastructure and distribution, empowering our students with time-proven rhetorical skills, and allowing our students to be heard even on a small scale, we can use blogs to extend the protopublic space of the classroom. I could share numerous instances of my students learning rhetorical principles and gaining from the publically oriented use of blogs. For the sake of space, I'll share just a few. For example, one of my students was writing a paper on international adoption and posted about the subject on the class blog. A researcher on international adoption who has adopted several international children commented on my student's post, giving useful ideas on how to improve the argument, links to additional sources, and unique insights. Another student posted a somewhat uninformed opinion on our university's bookstore policies; the director of the bookstore kindly responded to her in a blog comment. As a result she ended up meeting with him about her concerns, revising her ideas, and posting an improved version which the bookstore director asked if he could share in one of his meetings. Another student posted his final rhetorical analysis of an *Onion* article as a blog post. His insightful analysis of irony and the news, which took advantage of the affordances of online writing, received multiple comments by readers the student had never met. One reader wrote, "Very Clever, witty. Overall really enjoyed it. I've never read the site before and you've got me hooked. You seem to be a scholar keep it up" (matffutt). (In all honesty, never before has one of my students written a rhetorical analysis that anyone besides me wanted to read.)

The previous examples are exceptional in that my students interacted with members of broader communities. Yet on a weekly (and sometimes daily) basis, my students have had positive interactions online with other members of the class, interactions in which the blog helped to make our classroom a protopublic space, a place of discussion and debate, argument

and counterargument. One of the most common blog assignments that I give requires students to post a segment of whatever paper they are working on for the class (argument proposal, first paragraph, major evidence for argument, etc.) In this particular case I asked my students to post an initial argument for their opinion editorial assignment and provide several of their main reasons for the argument. At 10:29 p.m., the day before the post was due, Charlee posted a brief post arguing for the legalization of marijuana, citing the focus of the justice system on marijuana usage despite more important crimes, benefits for the economy, medicinal properties, and supporting drug cartels through its illegality. Her post was brief—193 words including the title and a link to a relevant video. Yet it spurred great discussion between her classmates, and influenced not just what she wrote in her final opinion editorial, but how she wrote it.

At 11:16 p.m. Emily H. responded, “I am very interested in your thoughts. I think you have good insights about jail time and bigger, worse crimes than smuggling. Your claim has interested me in pursuing my opinion about the matter further. Thank you!”

At 11:34 p.m. Tannen replied, “Yes legalizing marijuana might help the economy out a little bit but then we would have alot more people getting high and ruining their lives. The fact that it is illegal now is a big factor in why some kids are not doing it. They are afraid of getting a run in with the law, so they stay away. If you legalize it then you will have a lot more messed up kids. Also if you use your logic then are you saying it would be better to legalize all other kinds of drugs too? Because technically we would be helping the economy just a little and would not be helping the drug dealers. But if you do this I believe it will only make our society worse.”

At 12:57 a.m. Emily L. continued the conversation: “Where do we draw the line between what we know is wrong and what may benefit the country? [...]It's difficult to know where to draw the line when it comes to our morals and government laws.”

At 2:05 a.m. Josh added his two cents: “How is the legalization of marijuana any different from how legal it is to consume alcohol? Tannen, if you are telling me that there will be a significant increase in marijuana users if it becomes legal, you are mistaken. The people who want to smoke the cannabis will smoke it regardless. Do you think people were afraid to consume alcohol during prohibition? No, people drank and partied it up anyway. I am personally okay with the legalization of marijuana. There would obviously be many restrictions on it anyway. Where and when (in terms of age) you can use it.”

Hours later, Tannen replied again, as did Emily L. Then Charlee left a final comment, responding to what others had said. By her next blog post on the topic, Charlee was more aware of some of the major arguments for and against drug legalization. Notably, she had a much greater understanding of what it would take to convince her particular university community (the target of her opinion editorial) on the subject. While heated, the discussion was civil and respectful. The students didn’t change national policies with this debate. And I doubt that anyone beyond the members of our class read Charlee’s post. Yet each of the students engaged in productive discourse—a conversation that mattered to them on an individual level. They dealt with alternative perspectives, even within the constraints of a largely homogenous group of politically conservative 18-year-olds. Through the blog, they participated as members of a shared classroom community in a protopublic space, “[practicing] public discourse...by thinking, talking, and writing about and for different publics” (Eberly 172).

### Conclusion

The Internet is full of limitations, particularly in regards to its purported democratic nature. Yet we can and should use the powerful tools provided by these new media that enable student involvement in public spheres. As teachers, we can work together to make the Internet a

more democratic place. By recognizing the limitations of blogs, and purposefully implementing public-oriented teaching practices and methods, the blog is an ideal genre to help facilitate a protopublic space within the composition classroom.

This is particularly necessary in light of evidence that civic and community discourse increasingly occurs in technologically complex places. Simmons and Grabill have argued that “nonexpert citizens can be effective, but in order to be effective they must have an art that is powerfully inventive and performative” (422). They continue, “It is obvious that a meaningful civic rhetoric that is effective in contemporary public spaces must help people write, speak, and compose new media effectively” (422). In order to be effective, our students must practice writing, speaking, and composing with new media, for as Diane Penrod explains, “If a writer cannot write in the modes appropriate for the electronic universe, he or she will be marginalized—considered ‘information illiterate’ by those around the writer” (19). With this in mind, it is little wonder that the CCCC position statement on writing within digital environments, as previously quoted, states that all composition courses that use digital environments should “provide students with opportunities to apply digital technologies to solve substantial problems common to the academic, professional, civic, and/or personal realm of their lives” (CCCC). This is an ideal worth seeking for, even if it cannot be fully realized within the constraints of a single class in a single semester.

The blogosphere—and more generally, the Internet—may not be more democratic than traditional forms of publication and communication. But it can be a great tool for us to use in our classrooms, especially as we weigh both the strengths and the weaknesses of new media in crafting our assignments and teaching. When we do so, a blog assignment can act as a press conference, the author presenting a procedure or claim, readers responding with questions or

concerns in the comments. A blog assignment can act as a modern version of a debate between peers in a salon or a coffee-shop, everyone contributing competing ideas in an evolving conversation. A blog assignment can act as a writing workshop, the writer learning from audience feedback, coming to understand counterarguments and refining her own ideas. A blog assignment can be an integral part of a protopublic classroom space, helping us achieve our goals.

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