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Civic Participation in the Writing Classroom:

New Media and Public Writing

Jonathan Wallin

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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ABSTRACT

Civic Participation in the Writing Classroom:

New Media and Public Writing

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Public writing evolved from the social turn in composition pedagogy as scholars sought to determine which practices would be most effective in utilizing writing instruction to help fulfill the civic mission of the university and educate not just for vocational training, but to train students as better citizens as well. Based on the scholarship of Susan Wells, Elizabeth Ervin, and Rosa Eberly (among others), public writing scholars strove to distance the theory from old, generic forms, like letters to the editor, and create new arenas where students could be genuinely involved in civic acts and public discourse.

As these scholars sought out new venues for their students, they proclaimed the Internet might offer better opportunities for public writing. This article discusses the effect new media, specifically blogging, has had on public writing, and how the promises of blogging in the classroom fall short of our expectations of public writing.

Keywords: composition pedagogy, online writing, digital media, blogging, public writing

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Introduction

I started my career as a graduate instructor of composition in August of 2008. As a new teacher, I found I approached teaching writing the same way I was taught to write: by assigning writing that involved my students in public audiences and public issues—what Susan Wells and others have termed “public writing” (Wells; Weisser; Johnson). The term “public writing” first surfaced in *College Composition and Communication* in October 1974, when James Hiduke used it to describe the needs of his students and what they expected to gain from writing instruction. He said that his students “want to change people’s minds and actions [...], work with people, be aggressive about their ideas, [and] use their writing in a public way” (303). In 1975, Sharon Crowley and George Redman used the term to describe any writing that might be submitted for publication (279).

But it wasn't until Susan Wells published “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” in 1996 that the term started to gain some precision. Joseph Harris, editor of *CCC* at the time, summarizes Wells’ use of the term to indicate writing tasks that include and are similar to “letters to editors, stands on controversial issues, and the like” (324). I refer to this type of writing as “letter assignments,” meaning assignments whose sole public function is to be mailed to a publication (newspaper, magazine) or figure (Senator, mayor). Wells argues that these are the historical instantiations of public writing, and she uses her article to discuss how relying on these “letter assignments” to implement a public writing curriculum can lead our students to resist public writing, rendering it an ineffective teaching method. The resistance she talks about stems from the decontextualized and formulaic nature of letter assignments, especially when confined to the classroom. She suggests that we need to find better

public writing venues for our students. We need to create opportunities in which the mission of public writing—to foster civic participation and put the rhetorical strategies learned in the classroom to action—can be more fully realized (336). In her writing, Wells argues compositionists need to move public writing beyond these “letters to the editor, campaign leaflets, [and] letters to Congress” (328), and into arenas students find both more authentic and more exigent (338). This need remains pertinent today, and should influence instructors to seek out new venues where the public writing of our students can thrive.

Since 1996, others have talked and written about public writing, despite the term itself not always accompanying such arguments. In their respective *Rhetoric Review* articles, both Elizabeth Ervin and Rosa Eberly make clear arguments for more and better public writing in the composition curriculum. Ervin's 1997 piece, titled “Encouraging Civic Participation among First-Year Writing Students; Or, Why Composition Class Should Be More like a Bowling Team,” makes clear connections between teaching our students writing and teaching our students to be good citizens. She claims that through public writing “we can influence [our students'] literate and their civic lives, inside *and* outside the classroom” (398). In Eberly's 1999 article “From Writers, Audiences, and Communities to Publics: Writing Classrooms as Protopublic Spaces,” she theorizes that educators must react to John Dewey's assertion that “improving the means and methods of communication is the only way citizens can recognize their common interest,” and thereby function properly in their communities (168). She is talking about public writing when she says teachers and students need to “work together to create and enter real-world discourses,” an act that fulfills Dewey's admonition to improve communication (174). I therefore envision public writing as the production of texts that can thrive in “real-world discourses” and contribute

to the lives our students live outside of the classroom. It deals with issues pertinent and exigent to the day to day challenges they face as citizens in a public, and it is addressed to an audience that is directly related to this exigence.

In my own teaching, I have seen the power of public writing as a teaching method for first year composition. This moment came when one of my sections made the discovery that they, as a class, had become a public. They realized they possessed the means to ameliorate their condition through collective action. The course I taught took place in a learning community that required the entire group of students to register for the same classes, live in the same section of the dormitories, and participate in regular social events with their fellow class mates. The class envelope in which they enrolled consisted of two larger classes like History or Physical Science, and two smaller classes like Freshman English and University 101—a study skills class that became the impetus for their public experience. Close to the end of the semester, our class discussion arrived at the topic of University 101's usefulness. Most students were unenthusiastic about the class because of its structure. Although it consisted of busywork and other menial tasks, it was still graded on an A scale. I agreed with them that the course seemed a bit below their level of scholarship, and asked them what they could do about it.

At first, they weren't interested in doing anything. The study skills course was all but over at this point, and they, like students before them, had made it through. I prompted them to remember what they'd learned about the power of writing, and they immediately came to life. Before long they had launched a discussion detailing how they could write letters, to whom they would send the letters, and, considering their audience, what kind of rhetorical appeals would be most effective. They recognized their power in acting as a group, either by sending multiple

letters or by sending one letter with multiple signatures. They also had a concrete audience in mind—the faculty who advised their learning community. Once they recognized their audience and the potential they had to change things through writing, the theory we'd talked about in class became instantly real.

This experience led me to understand two things. First, there are situations in a student's everyday life that constitute his or her participation in a public. Second, these situations are difficult to isolate, especially in terms of issues that pinch each class member. Throughout the rest of the semester, we discovered issues that affect each class member. One day the issue was wireless Internet (or lack thereof) in the dorms. Another it was about the inconvenience of the buses that moved students to and from the most distant freshman dormitories. We also had discussions about available freshman dining programs, dress codes, extracurricular requirements for incoming freshmen, and other pertinent day to day issues confronting them. It was through such discussion that public writing became relevant in their lives. They now had the power to isolate each issue and, through writing, actuate change and ameliorate their situation. They were able to situate themselves and identify themselves as members of a public, and as such recognized the ability to better their situation. This, I believe, justifies why so many instructors pursue a curriculum based in public writing.

But public writing is not free of defect. Those who celebrate its strengths also bemoan its weaknesses. Christian Weisser explores public writing in his book *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*. In a move echoing Wells, Ervin, and Lester Faigley, he notes that the traditional constructs of public writing—letters to the editor, letters to congressmen, and other correspondence with the public sphere—fall short of public

writing's potential to reinvigorate rhetorical education (94). These letter assignments can seem artificial and fail to take root if students don't understand how these issues, and how their writing about the issues, function outside of the classroom. Towards the end of his text, Weisser hints that online writing venues might be one of the means by which instructors can respond to the problems of audience and exigence that plague letter assignments (106). These venues can be superior to "a single discursive arena like a newspaper" (107), because they help students see how their writing can exist as part of a discussion geared towards changing the status quo. If we can utilize the Internet to show students how they—and how their lives—fit into the writing we assign to them, online venues could satisfy many of the complaints made against public writing.

This interest in online public writing has arisen in tandem with a surge of interest in new media's role in the composition classroom. A quick comparison of the "Practices of Teaching Writing" section from past CCCC conference programs shows a fourfold increase in sessions that deal with writing and new media from seven in 2004 to thirty-two in 2010 ("Conference Calendar: 2010 CCCC"). While scanning past program schedules and counting digital media titles is not the most empirically sound method of tracking trends, it is quite clear that new media's presence in composition pedagogy is growing. And while media can be delivered to students in many forms, some of the most ubiquitous adaptations take place in the proliferation of assignments that move student writing online. From class Facebook pages to Ning communities, Blackboard discussions to online message boards, and from blogs to Twitter, writing online is evolving as a common occurrence in the curriculum of writing instructors. Of all these venues, I will focus mainly on how I used student topic blogging in an attempt to realize some of the promise the web holds for public writing. Blogs, an accessible and familiar medium,

mesh well with the theory behind public writing. I argue that topic blogging by students (a term I will more thoroughly define shortly) seems to satisfy the public writing needs Wells and others talk about, but that blogs can easily succumb to the same problems seen in letter assignments and other traditional public writing. I will show how some of the promising qualities of student topic blogs—the authenticity of student blogs and the chance to find an audience outside of the composition classroom—can fall prey to the same concerns scholars voice about the historical methods of public writing.

Public Writing in the Composition Classroom

There has long been an exigence for public writing in the university. This need grew out of the general push for civic engagement that has occurred in composition during the past decades (Bizzell; Weisser; Johnson). This happened concurrently with the social turn in composition studies, a move causing instructors to search for ways in which their students could participate in writing that would engage them in civic life (Trimbur). Public writing strives to fill the gap acknowledged by Barry Checkoway in his article “Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research Institution.” He notes the difference between an educated citizen and an engaged citizen and why education isn't enough to prepare one for life in a democracy. He cites the need for students to “be prepared to understand their own identities, communicate with people who are different from themselves, and build bridges across cultural differences in the transition to a more diverse society” (127). This civic mission is why I came to graduate school—I wanted the opportunity to help train citizens through writing instruction.

Checkoway questions the role the university currently plays in establishing critically-minded citizens. He claims most universities were “established with a civic mission to prepare

students for active participation in a diverse democracy” (125), noting that the early American university was conceived with a truly unique vision of service and democracy at its base (127). All of this is at risk, he argues, due to the abandonment of these ideals in favor of vocational training (127). Checkoway argues that, despite shifts occurring in the “civic landscape,” these issues can be overcome chiefly via the methods of education put in place at the university (128).

Paul Woodruff echoes this claim in his book *First Democracy*. He wonders what value is lost in education if the primary benefit students gain from university training is a better employment outlook. “In itself,” Woodruff states, “preparation for jobs is a good thing. But who is educating people for good lives as citizens?” (228). Woodruff is talking about the classical juxtaposition of *paideia* and *techne*—distinguishing between education of the whole human being and learning skills as a craftsman. Public writing aims to bring university education back from the brink of vocational training and ensure students learn the rhetorical skills required to succeed in civic roles that ensure the preservation of freedom in our country.

To return education to its civic roots, Checkoway proposes “elements of strategy” through which the university can once again foster civic engagement. Of the four elements (strengthening student learning, involving the faculty, increasing institutional capacity, and connecting democracy and diversity), two share kinship with practices found in the composition classroom: strengthening student learning and connecting democracy and diversity. Since most (if not all) universities require some form of introductory writing education in order to obtain a degree, the writing classroom has an excellent logistical opportunity to instill in education the type of civic awareness Checkoway finds lacking. According to Wells, Weisser, and others, the use of curricula based on public writing can do much to satisfy this exigence.

Weisser has made one of the most recent attempts to define public writing. In doing so he pulls from the theories of Wells, Ervin and others. He says public writing “consists of written discourse that attempts to engage an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals to bring about progressive societal change” (92). He gives public writing place and scope. The place he gives it is not concrete. He argues it is not concrete in the sense that there is no set means by which student writing might be considered public. Rather he places it in the presence of an audience—one that reaches beyond the realm of the classroom. This does not mean that the classroom audience should be ignored, but rather that the classroom audience should not be the only audience for whom the writing is done. Specifically, he states that “public writing is often directed toward a particular audience who might be influenced by the student’s writing” (92). The scope, then, falls in line with Wells’ argument of action: public writing should work to influence others in efforts to “bring about progressive societal change” (92). He agrees with Wells that the old standards of public writing tend to be less effective at accomplishing this scope, especially in terms of place (existing beyond the classroom) and audience (94).

In her “Rogue Cops” article, Wells identifies what constitutes public writing, and why this current iteration falls short of its scope: “Public writing in a composition course [can be] understood as a relation between readers, texts and actions” (338), where students “aspire to intervene in society” in order to reach an audience that can respond to the issues about which students write (328). Audience is one reason she is so opposed to assigning “an essay on gun control, or a letter to a nonexistent editor” (328). She classifies such letter assignments as “generic public writing” (328). These generic assignments force students to “inscribe their positions in a vacuum: since there is no place within the culture where student writing on gun

control is held to be of interest, no matter how persuasive the student, or how intimate their acquaintance with guns, ‘public writing’ in such a context means ‘writing for no audience at all’” (328). It is clear, then, that an acceptable forum for public writing would have a specific audience in mind, one that could respond to and deliberate with our student authors.

Matthew Johnson builds on this idea by stating that “public writing avoids the difficulty of a nebulous ‘general interest’ audience: it *requires* someone to whom the written word must be addressed” (271). Traditional assignments cannot provide this type of an audience. The potential readers of a letter to the editor or op-ed are nebulous and insubstantial, and as such offer little value in the manner of deliberation. No back-and-forth can exist, at least not in ways meaningful to both the writer and the reader.

The historic iterations of public writing are far from optimal. Weisser notes that when he asked other writing teachers “if they had done assignments or taught courses focusing on public writing,” most said yes. They thought that “a letter to the editor of the local newspaper on a current topic” was satisfactory public writing. This is congruent with what Wells said of the genre, that as “Rhetoricians and compositionists have turned to toward the public, [they] have some problems locating the public” (326). Weisser goes on to say that when students perform this writing, they do so “just to fulfill the assignment,” feeling that “more often than not, the issues they write about have little bearing on their lives outside of the classroom,” lacking the exigence needed to create good public writing (94). Good public writing, then, needs to be relevant to the life of the student in order to be successful. Authenticity is the term I used to describe this in my introduction. Establishing relevance becomes a requisite step in moving beyond simple involvement through the quasi-meaningless writing tasks derided above.

In “Encouraging Civic Participation among First-Year Writing Students,” Elizabeth Ervin questions the traditional means of involving students in public education like encouraging magazine subscription and reading popular newspapers. She calls on teachers to “create structured opportunities for students to engage in authentic civic discourse” (395), authentic in the sense that it is meaningful in their lives and for the audience for which it was created—that it can instill in the writer a strong sense of ownership. She, like Weisser and Wells above, suggests that instructors move past these impotent strategies and bring their students into the public realm by “reimagining students as citizens and actively promoting that identity within the classroom” (393). And while it can be argued that this is simply a matter of channeling our students towards topics that interest them, I believe that the venues we choose to use—letters, essays, blogs, or tweets—are an integral portion of good topic selection. And while letter assignments are a step in the right direction, they still lack the level of engagement that students need in order to posit themselves as actors and players in publics relevant to them.

Public writing, almost from the moment Wells, Ervin, and others wrote about it, has been moving towards online writing. These scholars establish that good public writing must engage a real, tangible, recognizable audience. It must also entreat students in ways relevant to their lives outside of the classroom. And it must do so in a manner that feels genuine and real to students. While Weisser, Wells, and Ervin successfully identify and establish these criteria as essential components of public writing, they offer only limited guidelines and skeleton structures—theoretical possibilities whereby such needs might be satisfied. They do not deliver a tangible solution we can use to satisfy these criteria. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of imagining and realizing such a space across varied communities and discourses. But the ever increasing role

that online spaces play in our lives promises to make such a realization more probable. Wells, in 1996, likened the construction of good publics to the construction of “MOO's and newsgroups,” fledgling online communities where people congregated to exchange ideas and discuss various interests. These structures are the ancestors of many solid online discourse communities we are familiar with today. Weisser goes further than Ervin and Wells when suggesting where we should take public writing, saying that the answer might lie in the newer communities being built online (107). It is in this direction that I took my own students, implementing a curriculum that involved what they foresaw as the logical progression in public writing: the Internet.

New Media and Public Writing: Topic Blogging by Students

A shift towards the digital seems to be a reasonable turn in writing's evolution. For decades, as discussed above, people have argued that a university education must train students to be active participants in democracy (Checkoway; Clark; Dewey; Eberly). And for years people have postured over where such a venue can be found (Weisser; Wells; Ervin; Johnson). I will discuss how online writing has become the newest darling for renewing public writing's civic mission, and why it can easily fall short of all the hype. I will begin by talking about the prospect of civic engagement and how it relates to blogging, and will discuss the problems such a prospect presents. I critique the use of the blog as a quick fix for public writing, arguing that it shares the same difficulties in establishing a real audience and building authenticity seen in more traditional public writing venues.

Although the argument exists that online writing—specifically blogging—presents the most hopeful outlet for public writing in years, my experience with the genre was far from perfect. Indeed, student blogs can help teach real life lessons of audience and encourage issue

ownership and authenticity, all elements of good public writing. But from my experience, none of these things are inherent in the medium of blogging. We cannot just dub the Internet a public space and hope that it will improve the experience our students have with public writing. Some instructors look to the web as the source for their “public writing” fix in the same manner that Weisser's colleagues casually used letters to newspaper editors to implement public writing in their classes. They think that a quick jump onto the Internet will give them the relevant public writing their course is missing. But in reality, the web has no innate ability to create a meaningful writing experience, just as writing in a book is not good writing because it's in a book. The web is only a medium, and an author will always be primarily responsible for the quality of the work produced for that medium. Good student writing can lead to meaningful online spaces, but the spaces themselves carry little intrinsic value. Ignoring this can cause students to feel that online writing is just the latest gimmick teachers use to try and foster civic participation. Writing on the web feels potent. Compositionists find it attractive because it is accessible, cheap, and generally popular among students. It also feels like it is satisfactorily democratic.

When I use the term democratic, I am invoking the tendency we have of considering a space in which the exchange of ideas can function freely as a democratic space. This idea becomes clear through a return to Woodruff's *First Democracy*. He claims language can be used to form cohesive bonds which in turn have the ability to maintain the structure of a healthy public. He isn't talking about the static language found in laws and constitutions, but the way in which citizens use “discussion to sort out good ideas from bad ones, justice from injustice, and so on” (138). Since the requirements to access online forums where discussions take place are minimal, online spaces do seem very democratic. Anyone with a library card can log on to

YouTube and post comments about videos they see, often participating in good deliberation in the process (Jackson and Wallin w385). Among available online writing venues, blogging has established itself as an especially accessible medium. Blogging has supplanted the old model behind text distribution—the model of writer, editor, publisher, and supplier—by making it easy for a single person to assume all these roles, albeit with varied effectiveness. And while this ease of access has also served to muddy the waters of online content, the possibility of being heard by moving your voice online still persists. And this plays a big part in the current desire to move student writing online. As a writing medium, an online space intrinsically feels more authentic—more likely to exist and thrive outside the classroom—than an 8.5” x 11” sheet of paper with Times New Roman typeface.

This sense of authenticity is one reason I chose to pursue blogging as the medium of choice for my last batch of writing students. Blogging actually *is*, in a certain sense, very democratic (Cohen). I'm talking about the feeling that pervades each amateurish keystroke of every up-and-coming blogger—the confidence that there are people somewhere that are interested in what he or she has to say. Stories of citizen journalists scooping political scandals (Rosen), bloggers taking on mainstream media and winning (Kurtz), and countless nobodies finding fame and fortune fuel this belief. It's the electronic epitomization of the American dream: on the Internet, anybody can have a voice, and that voice can be heard by anyone. When I teach my students about audience, they inevitably ask me who the *real* audience for their work is. They can imagine their research being read by important people who make important decisions, but in the traditional hierarchy of the composition classroom, no one other than me and the students in the class will ever read what they've written. The nature of blogging promises to overthrow this

limited audience and replace it with the limitless audience the web promises. But those of us who have tried our hand at blogging know that building up an audience is a full time job. Making oneself heard on the web involves just as much work, if not more, as being heard by an audience in traditional writing does. An audience for blogs does not occur naturally.

The web is also appealing because it feels fresh. As Andrea Lunsford's "Stanford Study of Writing" shows, college students perform a majority of their writing using means that didn't exist 20 years ago (Thompson). They text, tweet, use Facebook and IM. As instructors, we feel like we can remain relevant to students by giving them assignments that use tools with which they are already familiar. It feels as though tapping into the great electronic revolution is all we need to do in order to engage our students in their writing and our classes. Not all students coming into our classrooms will be veteran bloggers, but they will have performed a lot of writing on the web—some of it perhaps the most meaningful of all the writing they have done. As the Stanford study shows, the writing young people are doing is very audience based, and as such takes on more meaning than their in-class writing:

For them, writing is about persuading and organizing and debating, even if it's over something as quotidian as what movie to go see. The Stanford students were almost always less enthusiastic about their in-class writing because it had no audience but the professor: It didn't serve any purpose other than to get them a grade. (Thompson)

How we implement blogging in our classroom is tied to this idea. It's easy to think that our students will catch the blogging bug and fulfill their assignments solely because we're doing something electronic—something from *their* world. This, I fear, is a mistake. While most of my

students were receptive to the idea of blogging, a few felt like I was out of line assigning them to blog. One student was so appalled with the idea that she titled her blog “Forced Weakly Blog [sic].” She later told me that since she *had* to blog for class, blogging became meaningless and devoid of reality. We cannot assume that students will embrace blogging as public writing just because it’s new media.

But blogging, of all online writing forms, seems to stand apart as the most accessible of author platforms. I believe this is because, as I illustrate below, it was born and developed as a medium meant to level the playing field of producing and distributing texts. Blogging is said to have been born when, in 1994, *Wired Magazine* employee Justin Hall started posting musings about his life to his continually updated web page (Harmanci). And while the Internet has always been seen as a realm of extreme democracy (Cohen), it wasn't until 2003 that its democratic potential became fully realized, as Google purchased the tech startup Pryn Labs, launching blogger.com into the mainstream of Internet life (McKinnon, Turnbull). And while not all blogs are (or were) published via blogger.com, it would be Blogger and Google that fed the fire which led to the current ubiquity of writing on the web. It was also around this time that the potential power of blogging became evident. Blogs played an essential role in exposing “Rathergate” (Kurtz), the scandal that occurred when *60 Minutes* used forged documentation to claim that then-President George W. Bush had disobeyed orders on multiple occasions while serving in the National Guard (Leung). The advent and wide adaptation of really simple syndication, or RSS, helped blogging overcome the difficulties associated with distributing the writing people did on their blogs (“History of RSS”). This has a direct relationship to the public nature of online writing. Creators of online writing must be able to alert consumers in a manner that doesn’t

impede access (via cost or difficulty of use) to their work. This works to solve some of the audience issues of historical public writing because it creates a direct link from the author of a work to a consumer. When our students write blog posts, RSS helps them reliably distribute their work to their audience.

But when an instructor makes the leap online, there is no guarantee that the shift in venues will change the way students react to public writing tasks. We, as a populace, have a very casual relationship with the Internet (Tate). Look no further than the constant stream of oversharing done on Facebook and other blogs for proof that we often post before we think (Tate). This casual attitude can easily make its way into how we assign course-based blogging. It can surface as lax assessment and grading, unclear expectations of our students, and ambiguous learning outcomes or goals for our students' blogs. Steven Krause warns of this when he outlines his failed blog experiment in his 2004 article in *Kairos*. He notes that, after a retrospective analysis, some of the problems he encountered when using a blog in a graduate seminar called "Rhetoric and Culture of Cyberspace" were related to the manner in which he undertook the experiment. "I wanted this assignment to be as 'open-ended' as possible," he notes, adding that "more strict requirements" would have been very beneficial. He reveals that this attitude stems directly from his perceived nature of the blog: "I also thought that the blog technology very much called for this sort of open-ended and unformed writing assignment." This kind of careless approach to using a blog in class ultimately led to unclear expectations and vagueness, which prevented his students from doing any meaningful writing online. The casual manner in which we relate to the Internet can cause instructors to jump to blogging without giving the process the attention it merits.

Another reason why blogging risks being poorly implemented relates to the learning curve associated with adapting to these new technologies. Heather Urbanski discusses this obstacle in her essay “Meet the Digital Generation in the Classroom: A Reflection on the Obstacles.” She notes that “learning and internalizing new technology into daily life may come more easily for some than others . . . but still takes time to learn” and implement in the classroom (243). Compositionists are already tasked with more than just disseminating knowledge surrounding a specific topic. As the prior discussion of public writing demonstrates, writing instructors should be building citizens, improving critical thinking and reading skills, and teaching the mechanics and forms associated with good writing. When courses are also made to include new modes of creating and disseminating writing, the instructor becomes responsible for ensuring the use of these technologies is taught as well. Adding another plate to this already full tray creates a situation in which, from a purely practical standpoint, some items will fall.

As Wells and Weisser have shown in their research, two of the major problems associated with public writing are audience and authenticity. Topic blogging by students seems well positioned to help our students address both of these issues. When we talk about blogs in the composition classroom, we generally refer to one of two things. The first is what Fernheimer and Nelson call the “multiply-authored class blog” (par. 1). This version of classroom blogging consists of a single web space dedicated to the entire course. Students are assigned to write and comment on the class blog a fixed number of times. All the class discourse is contained on a single page or site, and discussions usually relate to a central theme guiding the course. The audience can be conceived as the class itself, as the discourse is often not meant to extend beyond this specific realm of influence (Fernheimer and Nelson par. 13). The second type of blog

is what I call student topic blogging. In this format each student writes on a single topic for the entire course of the semester, building an argument addressed towards a very specific audience—one whose existence should extend outside the realm of the course. This is the type of blogging I used in my persuasive writing course. I had twenty-four students writing eight substantive posts on blogs based on topics of their choosing. They chose the topics and wrote a proposal that outlined how they would pursue the topic over the course of the semester, complete with a posting schedule, development strategy, and target audience for their writing. Some students chose to write about aspects of student life such as eating healthy on a student budget or maintaining physical fitness when free time is scarce. Others wrote on more general topics like how to care for your lawn or how to master Zen breathing. Some even chose topics with extremely specific audiences in mind. One wrote on Mormon cinema and how it should be interpreted in the canon of American film. I read and approved each proposal to ensure they were setting themselves up for success and hadn't chosen a topic too broad for our scope. I envisioned the blogs as serving two purposes.

The first learning outcome I wanted to achieve was to show students how their writing could interact with the writing of others in a setting not determined by the limits of the classroom. This falls in line with what Weisser, Wells, and others have noted as a problem with historical implementation of public writing. I felt that after witnessing the manner in which their writing was received by others interested in their topic, my students would realize that they were able to use writing to engage others who shared similar interests or faced similar problems as they did. As Gerard Hauser puts it in “Rhetorical Democracy and Civic Engagement,” I wanted my students to realize that they “have it within their power to influence the communities in

which” they lead their lives (13). My hope was that they would see their writing not as an assignment, but as a vehicle they could use to convey their ideas to a much larger audience. The standards of the blog led me to believe this would be the case: their writing existed in a public space, as anyone could access it.

But when they evaluated the blogging experience, most felt it was no more genuine than other writing assignments they had encountered. In fact, the only interaction their blog writing received was from other students in the class (who had to comment in order to satisfy course requirements), and from myself. Their blogs existed online, and the potential for a genuine audience was real. But since they were never accessed by anyone outside our class community, their real audience was no greater than any I had experienced in prior classes. While I had hoped the blogs would take on a public life of their own, in reality their voices were completely silent to those not immediately connected to the class. This taught me that, while student topic blogs should theoretically give them a real and tangible audience, they in fact did not. The audience was identical to any other assigned writing I had given.

The second outcome I worked towards was to make my writing assignments relevant to the lives of my students. I felt that, prior to this teaching assignment, the greatest problem exhibited in my students' writing was a lack of authenticity. In my past sections, students had a tendency to write reflections with a more genuine voice than what they used in other less spontaneous assignments. I also saw that students writing essays on a topic they cared for had an easier time satisfying the tenets of rhetorical argumentation learned in the classroom. I felt the blog could function as a vehicle that would transcend the limits of these traditional assignments and bring a high level of ownership to the papers of all my students. We spent the first two weeks

of class reading about publics and reflecting on their interests, all in an effort to help them choose a topic that would remain relevant to their lives throughout the semester. I gave them no guidelines other than these. They could write on any topic they desired. All of this was done in an effort to instill a sense of ownership in their writing. Hauser claims that such ownership is an integral component in any rhetorical classroom. He argues that students must be assigned writing that leads them to express “ideas in language that engages others and, on occasion, even inspires, the relationship between the discourse they craft and the world they inhabit” (13). I felt that students blogging on carefully selected topics of their choice would alleviate the issues of nonchalance that so often surfaced in their writing. But my students still related to the writing as assigned writing and did not think it differed greatly from other assigned writing in this respect. This was a failure of the blogs to perform to their potential in alleviating the historical complaints against public writing. Students learning public writing via blogging would benefit from some instruction regarding how one can build web presence and garner real readership for a blog. Although teaching skills like online presence management and blog optimization must compete with the rhetorical and stylistic constructs we also teach, they are essential in helping blogs become good public writing. Teaching a blog alongside traditional assignments is only going halfway. This new medium demands a fundamental shift in how we teach argumentation. When moving public writing online, we must teach the skills that enable good online deliberation, not solely reproduce good college essays online.

Conclusion

Assessing the writing my students did on their blogs was one of the primary difficulties I encountered during the semester. I read most of the posts they made on their blogs. But taking

the time to familiarize myself with the discourse community to which their topic belonged, then assess the position they'd taken in that community would have fallen well outside the CCCC's position statement on writing assessment. The CCCC Executive Council has released guidelines that indicate how writing instructors should assess student writing. The guidelines say, "Best assessment practice supports and harmonizes with what practice and research have demonstrated to be effective way of teaching writing. What is easiest to measure...may correspond least to good writing." The difficulty in assessing online writing is why they run the risk of eluding our traditional grading paradigms ("How Are You Going to Grade This"). And, according to the CCCC guidelines, such actions curtail the very task of assessment, calling into question the use of implementing online writing at all. If our students make efforts to write, shouldn't we make efforts to grade that writing? Couple this with the fact that the only attention their writing ever accrued originated from my requirement that they comment on each others' blogs. And what does that say about the end product? That the blog, adopted in order to battle everything that doesn't work about traditional classroom public writing, was in no way more effective, and in many ways less. I surveyed my students after the course, and over half of them felt that the blog assignment was busy work. This is my main critique with how blog use unfolded in my classroom. While blogging should have made their writing exist in more meaningful ways than traditional assignments, it did not. I believe my experience is valuable because it shows that a simple change in venue cannot alter the nature of student writing. I also feel blogs were less effective due to the hybridization of the course. Assigning my students to turn in three short arguments (1,000 words) and one long argument (2,000 words)—all of which fell soundly within the realm of the traditional persuasive essay—forced them to compose writing on the same

subject under two sets of criteria. The blog seems like it could satisfy what public writing currently lacks, but instruction would have to be geared very specifically towards blogging, not split between the world of academic discourse and the online world. Due to the ever increasing importance of how we present ourselves on the web, both socially and professionally, I can envision a turn in composition pedagogy that sees instructors abandoning the traditional essay-based writing pedagogies in favor of a methodology geared towards teaching our students about the literacy involved in building online presence and maintaining who you are (or appear to be) on the web.

Incorporating blogs into our pedagogies can place students as actors situated to move discourse in directions that online public writing allows. But we must account for situations that are present in any classroom. Since the blog will be assigned, it cannot slough off all artificiality. The blog itself does nothing to build authenticity. It is only through an authentic discursive experience that our students will view blog writing as authentic writing. And, as we know, blogs can be excellent deliberative spaces—spaces where readers can make audience-directed arguments and receive feedback directly from their audience. In order to do this, instructors must tailor the course to create this interaction by requiring students to make contact with others who write on similar topics and by soliciting these others to read and give feedback on their blogs. . Implementing tasks geared towards building web presence and seeking out others who belong to their particular discourse community would almost certainly improve the blogging experience.

I'm sure that using a blog to get our students to participate in public discourse is a step forward in the evolution of composition pedagogy. It has the potential to succeed as public by compensating for the failures Weisser, Ervin, and others see in traditional public writing venues.

But the space alone cannot determine how our students will react. Each assignment will always be exactly that: an assignment. And while it's clear that a hierarchy among writing assignments does exist, my experience taught me that my assumptions about how students react to assignments need to be based less on the writing venue and more on the experience they have doing the actual writing. The lack of (public) feedback and real isolation they felt surrounded their blogs made them seem more artificial where I expected them to find something real. Online writing, as a construct, cannot alone fix what's broken with public writing. But when implemented well, it can expand the reach of the writing classroom, working to bring an authenticity with it that our students will feel and appreciate.

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