

Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media

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Chapter 4

From Expository Blog to Engaged E-Portfolio: A Student-Centered Pedagogy in Process

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates a student-centered pedagogy in process through the example of an electronic portfolio final assignment in two First-Year Writing courses. The philosophy behind the assignment is based in cultural studies, constructivist pedagogy, and multimodal studies. If students learn by doing, they also learn about culture through critique, public writing, and reflection. Students can thus become engaged as writers and citizens through constructing web-based texts focused on social issues and written from personal perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago I taught two versions of an upper level writing class in which students learned html and designed their own web pages as their semester-long writing projects. Students had the whole semester to read and discuss topics related to internet and society, work on related writing assignments, do research for their final projects, and design and build websites. When I no longer had the opportunity to teach that class, I stopped using web technology other than the basic course management systems for each class; integrating web design into First-Year Writing or creative writing courses seemed more distracting than productive. In the academic writing courses, I wanted students to focus on traditional reading and writing skills and not add extra work with the introduction of technology requirements. Eventually, though, I began to assign weekly blog writing to replace hard-copy response writing in creative writing classes, and I started more fully utilizing the course management systems for writing and discussion in composition courses. I've also come to believe that web technology can no longer be compartmentalized or kept separate from the rest of the course content in any of my courses. Since web 2.0, internet use has become more interactive, and our uses of internet and social media cannot always be neatly separated

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from other daily practices. It is now also easier to make writing available online without having to learn html, transfer files, or figure out web hosting. In all of my courses, students now write responses and reflections on blogs, and create electronic portfolios as their final semester projects.

This chapter describes and reflects on my experience giving a final e-portfolio assignment and the related pedagogy and assignment scaffolding. The samples of student work included here come from two recent First-Year Writing courses focused on community, citizenship, and culture. The course content and assignments during the semester were designed within a context of critical, constructivist, and multimodal pedagogy. The final portfolio assignment was both specific in terms of requirements and open to students' creative interpretations, though not all students were comfortable with the creative freedom. Although I have learned a great deal about integrating web-based technologies, social media culture, and student writing into the pedagogical goals for this course, I still feel new to the design and implementation of the final portfolio assignment. With each iteration I encourage students to participate and construct on their own terms, offering them both structured guidance and space for their own creativity and innovation. This student-centered pedagogy integrates theory and practice with the goal of deeper engagement in both teaching and learning, and within the context of community, collaboration, and public writing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community, Citizenship, Culture

Aristotle asserted that no matter what one calls it, whether democracy or oligarchy, a government only works when its members have equal access, as citizens, to education and participation in the system of governing (Jacobis, 2013). Benazir Bhutto knowingly risked her life, after her own father and two brothers had been killed, to fight for democracy in Pakistan (Baughman & Siegel, 2010). Frederick Douglass emphasized the importance of critical literacy for emancipation from mental and legal slavery (Douglass, 1892). Martin Luther King, Jr. called on white and black mainstream America to come together to change the laws that kept segregation legal, as a step toward justice for all Americans (King, 1963). Jonathan Kozol and Marian Wright Edelman show readers how as a society we are failing the poorest and most vulnerable in our society: the children in under-resourced communities, and that we are responsible to do better (Loeb, 2004). And in *Soul of a Citizen* (2010) Paul Loeb encourages individuals to overcome feeling overwhelmed or helpless in the face of social ills and to take even small actions toward change. Grace Lee Boggs exemplified this in her life's work advocating for justice for people in Detroit and in motivating others to join the cause, reiterating the idea that we can be the change that we want to see (Boggs, 2012). These examples tell us a lot about how social change has happened throughout history: extraordinary individuals take on issues and work to create that change. What we don't always realize is that these same individuals began as ordinary citizens.

Contemporary students are overwhelmed with responsibilities including working part or full-time jobs while going to school, or having caretaking responsibilities in their families. But they are also especially vulnerable under changing economic conditions and decreased social safety programs. They are leaving college burdened by debt and at risk of not finding professional work for which their degrees have prepared them. Social Security and healthcare loom as big question marks in the future for those for whom retirement is a long way off. What some students don't realize is that they are also citizens who

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can participate in creating a future that will benefit more people in society. As Loeb writes, although being involved in community activism may not lead to instant improvements, many people claim “social activism gives them a sense of purpose, pride, and service; teaches them new skills; shows them how to confront daunting obstacles; and lets them experience new worlds. It offers camaraderie and helps them build powerful friendships” (2010, p. 11). We have numerous historical examples of individuals working on behalf of others, but we don’t always think of ourselves as having real voices for progress and change. Social change can be said to begin with individual awareness. This can lead to small actions that potentially spread (Loeb, 2010).

In the First-Year Writing classes that I discuss here, I introduced students to the concepts of community and citizenship, and invited them to engage through active reading and writing on related topics over the course of the semester. We discussed the above and other texts to more fully explore these concepts. Students were encouraged to synthesize the general concepts with their own values, interests, and experiences. In theory, this course could lead to a second semester service-learning course that would further engage in public writing in the kinds of ways described in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* (Flower, 2008). Flower advocates not simply writing for or about public issues, but writing in cooperation and collaboration with the publics most directly affected by those issues. A goal of this kind of writing is to engage in a public sphere and participate in transformative practices (p. 4).

Academic and Personal Writing

One challenge in the writing classroom involves offering students opportunities to deeply engage in both academic and personal writing. I believe that students can benefit from reading and writing widely, and so I require that they practice writing in a variety of genres. Students move through academic summary, analysis and response, reflection, personal essay writing, and blog posting. They also do in-class free-writing, short homework writing, group collaborative writing, and other activities. About two-thirds of the way through the semester, students begin to think about final writing projects that integrate a personal interest or experience with the topic of the course. This assignment can be related to, or come out of, previous reading and writing assignments, or go in a related but different direction. They are also required to include a few different kinds of sources in order to push their ideas beyond the personal. In my experience assigning personal essays that require outside textual sources, students tend to be more interested, engaged, and produce better writing than with earlier versions of research paper assignments. An important aspect of teaching writing includes focusing more on writing process and less on product. In particular, this means helping students to grow as writers and not simply to produce perfect papers. I also believe that *both* process and product improve when students are personally engaged with the material, and when they are invested they make the process work for them. In any class that I teach, my job is to scaffold context and structure so that they can work through low-stakes writing and other activities that lead toward larger, interactive and engaged, final projects. If the process is strengthened, the products will also benefit in more holistic ways.

Social Media, Public Writing, Audience

A recent Pew Research Center study (Perrin, 2015) looked at social media use from 2005-2015 and found that 90% of people age 18-29 use social media, and usage among groups older than 29 has been increasing. The study reported that 35% of people 65 and over now use social media, which is up from

only 2% in 2005. The study highlighted the disparities in terms of education level, household income, and race. Having only some college education can increase likelihood for use compared to those with only a high school education or less. Households with higher incomes are consistently greater users of social media. And only 56% of African-Americans use social media compared to 65% of whites and 65% of Hispanics (Perrin, 2015). The Pew Research Center Fact Sheet (2014) breaks down the data more specifically and also includes discussion of “Social Impact” from a 2010 survey. It was found, among other things, that “social networking sites” can be instrumental to helping people maintain social ties, feel less isolated, and be more politically engaged than those less involved in social media.

The importance of social media, especially in the lives of young adults, should give us a great deal to reflect on in terms of teaching practice. The use of internet in general, and social media in particular, is now intimately integrated into so much of our students’ lives. It seems to only make sense to bring this knowledge and practice into the classroom.

Pedagogy

After Paulo Freire (2000) a critical pedagogy is invested in student participation and engagement. My own pedagogy comes, in part, out of Freire and through James Berlin, especially in terms of encouraging students to read and develop their own critical literacy practices. As Berlin (2003) writes, “for Freire ... to learn to read and write is to learn to rename the world, and in this naming is a program for understanding the conditions of our experience and, most important, for acting in and on them” (p. 105-6). This kind of critical exercise includes engaging students in democratic and dialogic activities in the classroom; inviting them to participate across age, race, culture, and experiential differences; helping them to understand the rhetorical power of language; and encouraging their abilities to rewrite narratives in order to create and inspire community (Berlin, 2003). Contextualized by this philosophy, instead of acting as an authoritarian figure telling students what to learn, an instructor can instead facilitate critical and independent thinking while helping to create community in the classroom (Darling, 2015). In terms of rhetorical context, audience is also important; students act as audience for each other, and speak and write as engaged citizens in the world.

Theories of multimodality bring together pedagogy and practice in ways that help contextualize the integration of electronic media into the writing classroom. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014) claim that thinking new media from a pedagogical perspective “challenges us to reconceive ... how we communicate with and through media, how media interact with one another, and how we reflexively understand ourselves, individually and collectively, in our interactions across different media platforms” (p. 60). We can use this kind of perspective to investigate relationships between writing, rhetorical practices, and the public sphere (p. 67). Our personal and public lives have, in fact, become integrated by and through these new media, and it is through these that we are also able to learn more about ourselves in the world.

Anne Frances Wysocki (2004) argues that “new media needs to be opened to writing” (p. 5) by which she means bringing more reflection and engagement into the new media classroom. She explains that “new technologies do not automatically erase or overthrow or change old practices” and that writing teachers are in a good position to examine and critique the role of media in classrooms and culture “precisely because of how [writing teachers] see texts as complexly situated practice embedded in the past but opening up possible futures” (p. 8). Because our students are already communicating through

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a variety of media, we have an opportunity here to examine, discuss, and exercise both traditional and new practices with our students, preparing them for further work inside and outside of the classroom.

Further, Jason Palmeri (2012) argues that composing and teaching multimodal texts reinforce process pedagogy and a “collaborative investigation of composing processes” (p. 24) (for more on process pedagogy see Elbow 1973; Emig, 1983; Moffet, 1991; Tobin, 2001). Blending image, sound, and language in their composing processes, for students meaning-making thus becomes more personalized and encourages invention. Palmeri also points out the importance of reflection writing in order to “develop a more nuanced understanding of the unique affordances of visual, aural, and alphabetic forms of communication” (p. 47). Critical and active engagement and reflection, across modes and contexts, can be seen to potentially enhance students’ personal development, skills, and confidence in the writing classroom.

Additional arguments in support of inclusion of multimodal pedagogies and student projects appear every day. Claire Lutkewitte (2014) has assembled a powerful collection of scholarship in *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook* which includes previously published articles that present a diverse array of perspectives. Included in the collection, Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) cites “the proliferation of writings outside the academy” and the speed at which “technologies of writing” are contributing to new genres of communication in various modes. The New London Group (1996) advocates the concept of “design” in regard to learning processes and multiliteracies. In this framework, acknowledgment of difference is key and “classroom teaching and curriculum have to engage with students’ own experiences and discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural and subcultural diversity and the different language backgrounds and practices that come with this diversity” (p. 207). The New London Group calls this kind of difference “productive diversity” and it extends out of the classroom and into the world. They argue that as “designers of our social futures” we can harness pluralism in the meaning-making practices of community building. Multimodal pedagogy further asks what is privileged and excluded from classrooms and “if writing rhetorically means being responsive to the changing technological, economic, social, cultural, and political conditions in a society then we cannot demand that students only compose in one mode using only one technology” (Lutkewitte, 2014 p. 279-80; Jewitt, 2005). Multimodal composition can open space for this greater diversity of voices not only in the classroom but also in public realms. And it affords students access to greater toolkits for skill-building and occasions for meaning-making (Lutkewitte, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

When I began to think beyond reading response blog posts as discrete assignments to consider the integration of more comprehensive e-portfolios in my courses, I had to also contemplate purpose and framing in different ways. Further understanding of traditional and more contemporary pedagogies, in both theory and practice, became especially useful to me. Not only was I changing the assignment on paper, but through reading about others’ experiences teaching new media and incorporating multimodal activities and assignments, I came to better understand the value for students from a variety of perspectives.

In his article, “The Maker Movement and the Rebirth of Constructionism,” Jonan Donaldson (2014) shares his experiences of a transformed “understanding of pedagogy, teaching, and learning” through his foray into constructivist educational theory. Connecting his intuitive and practical teaching experiences, he explains how he came to realize that “at its heart constructionism argues for what I had been trying

to articulate: learning happens best when learners construct their understanding through a process of constructing things to share with others” (para. 6). My own experiences echo, in different ways, this kind of personal, pedagogical epiphany. Students learn best when they make, create, and engage in materials on their own terms. This is not to say that a college writing class, for example, should be unstructured so that students can do what they want. But rather, a class might be structured in such a way as to get students to pursue their own interests and personal connections to course materials; they should be encouraged to develop their own skill sets through the lenses of their own experiences. When Donaldson modified his writing assignments, in the context of contemporary “remix” and media culture, he realized that having real-world audiences in mind helped students to become more invested and engaged in their own writing. Giving them access to tools and media that they could use to construct their own projects, he saw students feel empowered and surprised at their own abilities to do kinds of work they hadn’t thought themselves capable. He opened writing to include forms beyond the traditionally textual, such as podcasts or animations.

Further, he began to emphasize reflection. As he explains, “when the students explained to the reader what they had created and why, their own learning was consolidated and deepened” (para. 5). The opportunities for reflection combined with collaborative practices helped students to think, create, interact and progress by way of their own interests and abilities and through learning from each other. My own experience mirrors these conclusions. Students tended to engage more personally with blog writing and in creating e-portfolios, and their reflection writing often articulated that leaning even more clearly.

In their Preface to *Writer/Designer*, the authors (Arola, Sheppard, & Ball, 2014) lay out their goals for multimodal pedagogy, which include helping students to be “more prepared for the complex rhetorical challenges they face as students and future professionals.” They discuss the enriched learning experience students receive by “doing,” similar to Donaldson’s ideas about “making,” and coming out of the New London Group’s idea of “situated practice.” They assert that these kinds of engagements, by way of experiment and reflection, will help students “develop the confidence and competence they need to leverage both old and new technologies and media for successful communication” (p.vii). Through the examination of a variety of real-world, multimodal texts, students learn about genre, which can help them to create their own writing across contexts and situations. The e-portfolio assignment, introduced early and integrated into the content of the whole semester, gives students practice navigating through traditional, hybrid, and media texts which may benefit them in their academic and professional lives.

Recent studies advocate integrating the use of technology with constructivist pedagogy. This kind of pedagogy engages the teacher as facilitator and promotes a learner-centered classroom in which students learn by doing. (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2011; Keengwe, Jared, Onchwari, Grace, Agamba & Joachim, 2014). The use of technology is closely tied to a focus on pedagogical praxis, in which the tools are used to deepen thinking and engagement of students immersed in their own critical learning practices. “Interactive multimedia generally present multiple ways that a problem could be solved thus allowing for greater thinking and exploration from students rather than just a one way. At the core of an effective constructivist pedagogy is an approach that integrates various technologies with active learning while allowing for the teacher to act as a guiding partner” (Gallant, 2000 as cited in Keengwe, Jared, Onchwari, Grace, Agamba & Joachim, 2014, p. 890). Interaction, collaboration, and reflection are shown to encourage engagement and student success in the classroom (Keengwe, Jared, Onchwari, Grace, Agamba & Joachim, 2014). Because we can no longer ignore the role of internet and social media in our daily lives, helping students to critically and creatively use these technologies can offer them more than the basic skills of the past.

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Arming students with tools and knowledge will also help them to recognize the downsides of internet technologies. If our thought processes and relationships in the world are changing as a result of increased internet and social media use (see Carr, 2011; Turkle, 2012) we may have to learn how to better manage our technological endeavors. Douglass Rushkoff (2010) argues that our awareness of the potential dangers can, in fact, help us to be more in control of our choices in regard to internet use. And other arguments about the negative consequences seem simultaneously hopeful that we can alter our practices for healthier outcomes (Turkle, 2012). As instructors in this Web 2.0, 21st Century, we can raise the level of awareness with our students and give them access to tools and strategies so they are not overtaken and lost in a virtual space of no return. How can we help students to use the internet creatively, productively, and in ways that will benefit them as active and engaged citizens of a larger world? I believe part of the answer lies in the learner-centered, critically pedagogical practices of integrating these technologies into our classes. Keeping the tools out of the classroom will not help students learn to negotiate these mediated spaces in critically literate ways.

The potential perils may be more acute when we consider the digital divides in relation to race, class, and access issues (see Bryant, 2014). Those with less access, education, and fewer resources are the most vulnerable to being swept away by surface-level practices. These are the students who need the most support to give them a technological, critical edge. In the two classes discussed here, when we began the semester, only a few of students had used blogs previously and only one or two had done some kind of web site design or construction. Over the course of the semester, through homework assignments and in-class work time, students learned how to set-up and design WordPress or Blogger sites and then turn these into complete e-portfolios. By the end, most everyone felt a tangible sense of having created a comprehensive web site portfolio basically from scratch.

Audience, Blogs, and E-Portfolios

In First-Year Writing courses we talk about purpose, focus, and audience, yet academic hard-copy papers are rarely seen outside of the student-teacher context. Students miss the opportunity to think deeply about audience in terms of purpose and focus, but also in terms of engaging themselves in the presentation of their work. Why is audience important? In this world of digital media, students are on Facebook and Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other sites writing, developing, and negotiating their ideas and identities in the world. Academic writing that remains cordoned off from the ways that students participate in the world does them a disservice; they may learn basic skills and how to write strong papers, and some students will be engaged and do that successfully, but this additional kind of “making” for a larger audience can also encourage students to become more confident, and maybe even come to enjoy writing. By shifting the audience beyond the teacher to the peer-space of the class and the public audience of the internet, the writing may be, potentially, exponentially diffused. This is not to say that one should water down the idea of audience so that a piece of writing can reach any person, but that while focusing purpose toward a particular kind of audience, students will also be aware of their rhetorical choices for an online audience. This can include critical examination of what and how audience functions, and how we might all think about ourselves as writers online and via social media in our personal and professional lives.

As a space of “rhetorical opportunity” (Miller and Shepherd, 2004), a blog can function as the private “cultivation and validation of the self” and simultaneously occur at the intersection of private and public, or a space of identity formation and questioning (Miller and Shepherd, 2004, para. 1). In 2009, a second study asserted that alongside the development of social media and enhanced interactive possibilities

online, the blog as a site of connection became more profound. Whether they are blogs from celebrities for their readers, or personal blogs written for self or others, the need to feel a part of a larger physical or virtual world is at the center of blogs' exigence (Miller and Shepherd, 2009). Inherent to the basic design of a "web-log" is an understanding of audience and rhetorical context, even while the blog, for the personal user, can function like a journal, offering a space for low stakes writing, reflection, agency, and creative expression with few rules for formality (Bryant, 2014).

I began to have a different view of using blogs in the classroom when I was invited to teach a class that had a required final e-portfolio. The class was relatively open in terms of overall design though there were basic goals and outcomes, including the students' development and online publishing of their portfolios. Using examples from previous sections of the class, and rubrics and advice from other instructors, I implemented the assignment in that section and further opted to include it as a similar assignment in another class I was teaching. Although I had already been assigning weekly reading response blog writing in my creative writing classes, I had not introduced blog writing in my First-Year Writing courses. As I moved further into teaching the e-portfolio, I came to realize that I had been underutilizing students' blog response writing in the creative writing classes. I saw the e-portfolio as a way to further the discussion of purpose and audience in more complex ways. Instead of turning in a final paper, on paper, to the instructor, the e-portfolio would allow students to publish their work online for a specific peer audience as well as a larger potential general audience. I began to encourage students to do reflective blog writing and make connections among texts and ideas, instead of writing generic summaries in response to reading assignments. I hoped this might encourage students to invest in personal writing that would more thoughtfully lead to the larger portfolio project.

The e-portfolio is appealing in the ways it offers the potential to bring together personal writing, reflection, creative expression and an understanding of rhetorical context with greater stakes. It can serve as a space for writing accumulated over the course of a semester like a traditional hard-copy portfolio, but it also becomes hybrid, hypertextual, and multimodal because of its web form. Considerations of layout, design, organization, structure and other elements take on greater meaning and require more attention. Instead of simply collecting materials, an e-portfolio can also serve as a single or cohesive project, like a fully formed website for a comprehensive paper bound together with a common focus, purpose, and sense of audience. Designing a single project into an interactive portfolio can potentially allow for more time and thought—within the confines of the semester time frame—for creative and organizational choices. Further, integration of other media including graphics, video, audio and other forms can turn the portfolio into a dynamic, multi-dimensional experience.

These are skills that go beyond the classroom. As Helen L. Chen (2009) argues, considering the increase in life span there will be a need to "help individuals think less in terms of terminal degrees and academic credentials and more in terms of transitions facilitated through the development of key work skills and personal competencies" (p. 31). She emphasizes the philosophy of lifelong learning which "places the *needs* of the individual at the forefront" (emphasis Chen's) and "the importance of exploration and preparation for change and adaptability in both formal and informal learning environments" (p. 31). The "efolio" combined with "reflective thinking," she explains, can be considered an example of "a learner-centered pedagogy focused on providing structured opportunities for students to create learning portfolios for the purpose of fostering coherence and making meaning" (p. 31). Students can learn by doing, but that learning is deepened and made more profound when they are required to reflect and make connections on their own terms.

Participants and Setting

The two classes observed here, although at different campuses, had a number of relative similarities in terms of demographics and classroom setting. The nearly identical syllabi had small differences in reading and writing assignments. Both sections were composed of students from a diversity of ethnic, cultural, racial, gendered, and economic backgrounds. One section was taught in a computer classroom in which each student had access to a computer, and when students were not working on computers we sat around a large table for class discussion. Many of the students in this section also brought personal laptops to class, had access to computers at home, and all students had access to a number of computer labs and resources on campus. The other section was not in a computer classroom but almost all students had personal laptops that they brought to class regularly. That campus also provided resources for students to borrow laptops to use for free for the semester. That classroom also had moveable desk-tables so we could arrange a circle as a whole group, or small groups could easily spread around the room. Physical space is an important consideration because of the collaborative nature of student-centered, constructivist practice; in less-amenable classroom spaces, an instructor may need to be more creative in terms of helping to engage conversation and collaboration.

In both sections we spent a number of class periods working on blogs and e-portfolios so that students could help each other, and I was available to work with whole groups of students or individuals. Although it is true that most students now use internet and social media regularly, in general they tend to have less experience setting up, designing, and manipulating sites for blog posting and turning these into whole portfolios. Early in the semester, I gave students the assignment to set up a WordPress or Blogger site, create a home page and a blog posts page, and publish an initial reflection post. Although a couple of students in each section were able to accomplish the task with little trouble, most students needed extra instruction and support. Over the course of the semester, all of the students developed the skills to make pages, create links, work on design elements to some degree, and post and revise their own writing. Some included additional media and spent more time on layout, font, color, readability and other considerations. Because this was a first-semester course, the requirements for media and design were minimal. The basic goals included introduction to the idea of the e-portfolio, extended consideration of purpose and audience, and general practice in philosophically and practically transferring traditional text writing to web form. Some students struggled with these basic ideas—especially thinking of their traditionally written papers in web form—while others were able to harness a deeper creative process of media integration.

Scaffolding

For these classes I utilized both the Instructure Canvas class management sites, and WordPress sites that I designed specifically, one for each class. The Canvas sites included course readings and prompts for short, weekly homework writing assignments. The class WordPress sites included detailed and regularly updated schedules of assignments, pages for links to articles and topics of interest in relation to assigned course readings and class discussions, pages with the lists of student blog sites, and miscellaneous other information. During the semester, students wrote short, weekly homework responses to readings and class conversations and posted those on the Canvas sites. Periodically, I also assigned longer blog reflection writing which extended and reflected on ideas from the weekly short homework assignments, readings, and conversation. I encouraged students to include quotes and references, but also to personalize and be

creative in the presentation of their responses. They posted these on their blog sites, and I made a list of the class blog sites on each class WordPress site that everyone could access.

The formal writing assignments ranged from academic summary to analysis to personal essay, and the final paper integrated personal essay and research. For the final paper, students chose topics from their own experiences or interests and in relation to community, citizenship, culture, and/or social activism. Papers topics ranged from education to animal abuse. Because the final paper went through a process of mind-mapping, freewriting, drafting, peer review on paper, and then peer review on-screen, it was easy for me to keep track of who was writing about what. That meant I could also intervene and assist at any point if a student went off track or got stuck somehow.

Small group peer-review helped students learn by doing and from each other. Not only did they receive feedback for strengthening their papers over the course of the semester, and building their sites, they were able to see what others were working on, to share information and skills, to practice effective communication, and to build confidence through collaboration. By the time groups started to peer-review their projects online, the process became messy and seemingly less effective. Working on-screen is distracting; students often have a hard time sticking with a linear process for reading through others' sites, and the feedback is given in parts and pieces. Often students ended up working on their own sites-in-progress instead of focusing on others' work. Because the sites are continually in process, they are never really completely finished before the end of the semester. Although I have tried to refine the guidelines for on-screen peer review from one semester to the next, I also believe some of the messiness is an important part of the process. The collaborative part of construction is counterintuitive to working in a linear fashion, but working in this non-linear way to read, comment, and help others create quality work can be especially beneficial.

The challenges in these courses included having enough time to effectively integrate discussion of the portfolios and class time to work on them. In these classes, with so many parts and pieces, it sometimes seemed as if the portfolio was not holistically integrated throughout the semester. At the same time, the course content, including theoretical grounding for assignments and the e-portfolio, did seem to overlap in serendipitous ways. Reading about and creating their own social media platforms helped students to think about audience and presentation in more real-world ways. In relation to the content of their final projects, it seems likely that they were able to form more critical perspectives in regard to audience and presentation than they may have if not for the public online forum.

DATA COLLECTION

Below I include samples selected from students' final portfolios, and reflection writing on the final projects and writing process. The samples come from the two classes described above. The figures below show the variety of approaches to audience, presentation, layout, and design. The reflection writings point to different concerns and feelings about processes and products. Students volunteered the inclusion of selections from their portfolios here. Two of the students, each with a keen awareness of audience, purpose, and online presentation, wanted their names included with their work, and their sites remain active online.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Audience

The portfolios take into account a sense of audience in different ways. Figure 1 shows a welcome page created by a student who had done volunteer work in the community. It calls attention to the value of community work by asking “How willing are you to help out in your community?” and incorporating an active poll for readers to respond to. In a different way, Figure 2 shows the home page from a portfolio that asks readers to rethink perceptions of Muslim-Americans. Showing a woman wearing an American Flag hijab, or head scarf, and repeating the image on the borders of the page, the author creates a strong visual argument. The project is divided into pages with titles including, “Ignorance,” “Racial Profiling,” and “My Experience.” From a personal perspective, the author appeals to readers’ sense of fairness to consider how Muslims and other minority groups are discriminated against in contemporary American society. Instead of attacking or telling a reader how to feel, the author brings the reader into her personal experience to show how misinformation leads to mistreatment for many groups in America.

Personal Investment, Layout, and Design

Many students began with a personal experience, or interest in a topic, related to community and social good. One student asserted that world peace might be possible if we start by thinking about personal happiness (Figure 3). Telling a story about her relationship with her grandmother, this student made a strong argument for the relationship between the individual and society that was at the center of our reading and discussion all semester. Although she didn’t use those terms explicitly, the connection and sense of reciprocity in that relationship was clear.

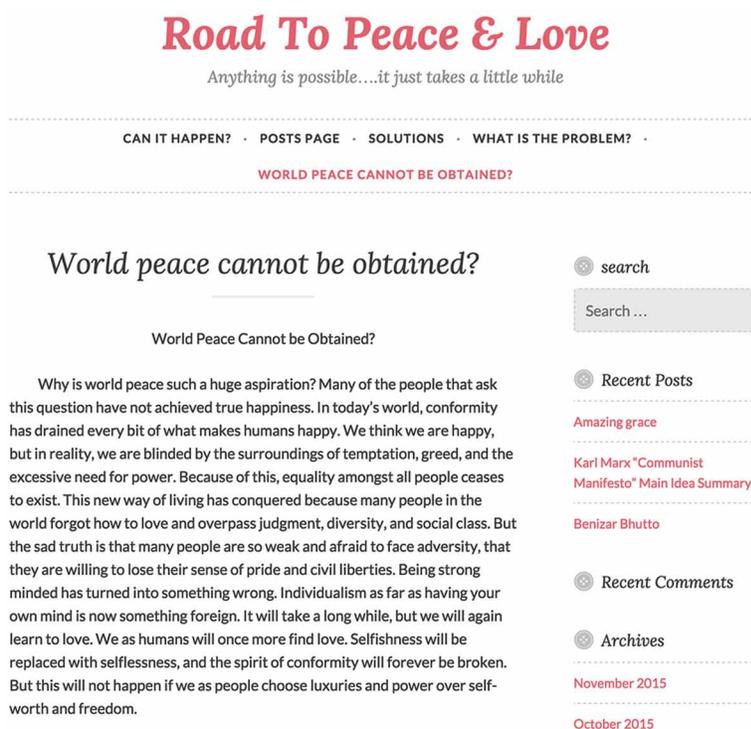
Figure 1. Welcome page of a student portfolio; this page encourages its audience to get involved with their communities.



Figure 2. *We Are All Equal*; this is the home page of a student portfolio. It engages its audience by showing that Muslim-Americans are patriotic and argues against discrimination in contemporary society.



Figure 3. *World Peace*; this student project begins with a personal engagement with the idea of world peace and the relation to personal happiness.



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Another project (Figure 4) foregrounds a strong personal investment in advocating for feminism in contemporary society, and attentively takes into account the web format in the presentation of text. Although the writer simply copied her final paper into a single page on the WordPress site, instead of dividing it among multiple pages, the text is engaging and visually pleasing. It reads like a long blog post, includes reader-friendly fonts and white space, and the text is often interrupted with images, links to other articles and sites, and additional elements. The page becomes a hypertextual reading experience, with which readers can interact. Images include “We All Can Do It #Feminism is worthless without intersectionality and inclusion,” a graphic play on Rosie the Riveter with three women representing intersectionality (made by Chelsea Valentin Brown at soirart.tumblr); the YouTube link to Emma Watson’s speech to the UN about gender equality; and a number of other comics and graphics. The page is colorful, and the writing is appealing, like many short articles posted on journalistic kinds of web sites that get shared among social media. This student has a clear sense of web audience, reader engagement, visual rhetoric, and her own writing style.

This site is also a great example of the final portfolio as a comprehensive project that incorporates other writing from the semester. The blog reflection posts—accessible from the Blog tab at the top—complement the long paper with discussion of equality, and political and economic rights, through various course readings. Here Lemees writes an especially thoughtful reflection on the Black Lives Matter movement:

The issue of individual and systemic racism and discrimination has always been a highly critical topic, but it seems that ... with the high profile case of the death of Trayvon Martin ... this controversy is now being debated more than ever. With the rise of highly influential activists and leaders such as Alicia Garza ... who coined the notorious hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, it’s almost inevitable that change is upon

Figure 4. *Confessions of a Teenage Activist*; this student supports her personal statement on feminism with outside sources.

The screenshot shows a WordPress blog page for 'Confessions of a Teenage Activist' by Lemees Ahmed. The page has a clean, modern design with a white background and orange accents. At the top, the title 'Confessions of a Teenage Activist' is displayed in a large, bold, orange font, with the author's name 'Lemees Ahmed' below it in a smaller, grey font. A navigation menu is located below the title, with 'ABOUT', 'BLOG', 'FINAL PORTFOLIO', and 'HOME' links. The main content area features the title 'Final Portfolio' in a large, grey font, followed by the subtitle 'Feminism and Social Media'. The main text begins with 'I have never really thought of feminism as an ideology but more so just a way of living. As human beings, it is in our moral philosophy not to murder, steal, cheat, lie, etc., but why don't we think of achieving equality as being a moral obligation? The textbook definition of feminism is the belief that all humans should have equal social, political, and economical rights free from the discrimination of gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. Feminism is not the call for women to become the supreme gender and create a new patriarchy, but it's the call for the advancement of women for equality.' To the right of the main content, there is a search bar and a sidebar with 'Recent Posts' and 'Recent Comments' sections. The 'Recent Posts' section lists 'Amazing Grace', 'Reflection', and 'Home'. The 'Recent Comments' section is currently empty. The 'Archives' section shows 'November 2015'.

us. "I've been praying for a moment like this one my entire life," says Garza when speaking about how the social media trend has brought so many young activists of all color together.

The beauty of the movement is not only that it gives a voice to African American men who are highly subjected to racial profiling, but it also plays a big role in other types of discrimination such as gender, sexuality, gender identification, etc. The leader and co-founder of the movement herself is an African-American, queer woman which in itself is essentially the most discriminated classification there is. It is already typically known that a white woman makes 76 cents to every dollar her male counterpart makes, but what most are not aware of is that African-American males make 75 cents to every dollar a white male is making. And shockingly, black women make roughly 65 cents to every dollar, that's a 35 cent margin!

Consequently, if as a society we remove the social and political stigma against black, queer women and unlearn and baptize our minds of racial prejudice, it is possible that equality will be granted to all races, religions, genders, sexual orientations, etc. I, a Muslim, Arab-American woman, experience discrimination on a regular basis and am an advocate of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Though I'm aware that the mission is directed towards black people, the message of equality and ending racism affects me as well. The fact of the matter is, everyone on earth will experience some type of prejudice and by ending it for the group most affected by it, we can end it for all.

This portfolio ultimately does a really nice job connecting readings, themes, and outside sources to explore a personal relationship to an issue of importance for this student in the world. By relying on both traditional textual examples and visual and other media from the Web, she is able to personalize and make this site her own in a thoughtful, academic, and critically literate way.

From a different design perspective, Figure 5 offers an example of a comprehensive consideration of layout and organization in a project about cyberbullying. A drop-down menu from the main menu at the top divides the project into multiple pages for easier reading and accessibility, and titles include, "Effects of Cyberbullying," "Personal Experience," and "How cyberbullying Can Be Avoided." Some of the pages include images, graphs, and links to other sites for facts and information. This site and the student's reflection, described below, illustrate a clear sense of rhetorical situation, purpose, audience, and personal investment through the choices she has made in terms of content and organization.

Some students further personalize their sites by including their mind maps (see Figures 6 and 7) or other elements. The mind map is an assignment that helps students to begin thinking about the final project with a low-stakes, visual, free-writing practice. For Kristina (Figure 7), the mind map served as a starting point and also an important visual rhetorical marker within the project itself. As an interactive web document, her portfolio incorporates short, easy to read sections of text organized over multiple pages as well as visuals and graphics to make readers' experiences more stimulating. The handmade mind map draws our attention to the ideas in the paper in a way that reiterates the arguments, because we are seeing them in a visually creative format. This writer/designer has a keen sense of digital rhetoric and presentation.

Reflection Writing

Connections between the personal and the social are further made in many of the reflections students wrote after completing their final projects. During the semester, they also composed short reflections

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Figure 5. Cyberbullying; this student portfolio incorporates a comprehensive consideration of organization and layout.

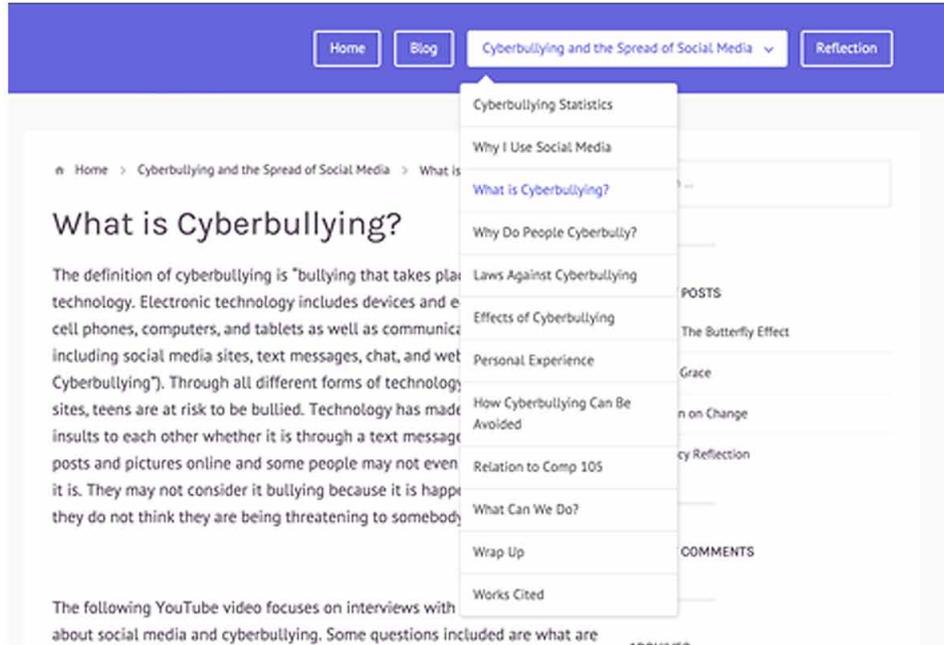
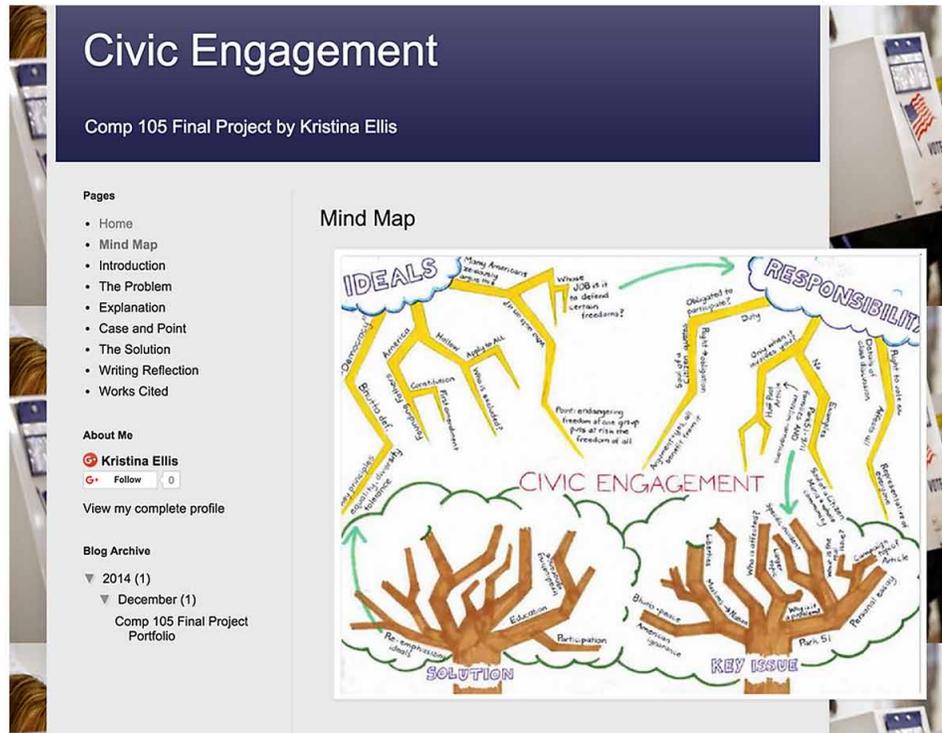


Figure 6. Hunger in America; some students included their handmade mind maps in their portfolio.



Figure 7. Civic Engagement; this student portfolio incorporates a clear sense of organization and creative presentation.



after each major writing assignment, and the periodic blog posts also functioned, in part, as reflection writing. Some of the students' final reflections focused more on the basic writing process, while others delved further into making connections between course content, the final paper topic, and the writing process. It is through the combination of the final projects and the reflections on those that the levels of student engagement become most apparent. The relationships between traditional process pedagogy, multimodality, and construction, or making, are also especially noticeable here.

Student Sample #1

This reflection brings together the project on cyberbullying referenced above (Figure 5) and the writer's personal interest in the topic.

While doing research for this paper, I learned a lot more about cyberbullying than I expected. I always knew the basics of what it was and how it happened, but when I was researching, I learned about the statistics of who is cyberbullied and why it happens. Cyberbullying happens way more than I ever thought. This was evident when I connected cyberbullying to the article we read about when President Barack Obama joined twitter and the racist comments followed immediately. This shows that cyberbullying hap-

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pens to everybody, not just teenagers. While writing the paper, I started with only a few sources, but as it expanded, I started to find more and more. One of the hardest parts about this paper for me was the length. I was able to write everything that I needed to say in about six pages and I struggled to get to eight. This is when I began to include more of my personal thoughts and soon, I had eight pages. I felt like adding personal thoughts and experiences about the subject made the paper easier to write. Although I haven't personally been cyberbullied, I do know people who have and I have seen the effect it has had on them. I also liked writing about how what I am planning on studying ... can hopefully help me be a part of stopping cyberbullying in the future. One of the sources I used included a lot of information and tips about how to avoid being cyberbullied. I knew about some of these things, such as using privacy settings or blocking whoever is bullying, but this article discussed other ideas that I hadn't heard about before. I think sites like this are very beneficial for teenagers to stay aware and avoid being cyberbullied.

Student Sample #2

One challenge in this kind of class is that not all students will be interested in the material related to community, citizenship, and social activism. I believe, however, that giving them the context of course readings and assignments, and then also offering the freedom to reflect, write from a personal perspective, and ultimately choose a topic that is of interest to them, helps them to find something to write about from a personal perspective.

The first time I read through the assignment I had no idea what I would write about. It seemed to me that this paper was supposed to be about a social issue. I didn't consider myself a social activist so I had no idea what to write about. I decided to call my mom ... We began to talk about the topic of education. This is something that she feels very strongly about and has transferred this passion to me. I started writing down some of the problems with education. Then I wrote down ways that I could support these ideas. These consisted of facts and life experiences. This part of the writing process was very unorganized because I was writing down points as my mom and I talked about them. After getting off the phone with her I reorganized my thoughts into a bubble map. This helped me isolate the ideas and find places where I would need to come up with more support.

Now that my ideas were organized it was fairly easy to write my paper. The first draft I wrote I did so without stopping. The support I used to back up my ideas was based entirely on my own experiences. When I finished writing the first draft I went back through the paper and found places where it would be helpful to include factual evidence. After the places for additions were identified I gathered the facts I needed and added them to the paper. Once this was done, my paper met the length requirement and I had run out of things to say. When editing I focused on refining my phrases and removing grammatical errors.

I think that this paper taught me how important the pre-writing process is. I found that the more organized I was before I began writing my paper, the easier it was to write. I was able to transition more effectively because I prearranged the order that I would present my points. Overall, the writing process went much smoother for this paper because of the additional planning I did.

Student Sample #3

This student wrote about the importance of social activism in general, through his experience working for the Smile Foundation in India. His reflection is personal, and makes strong connections between course readings, his experience, and reflecting on why all of that is important to share with his readers.

During the writing process I would often think back to the days when I used to serve as a volunteer in the Smile Foundation, a non-profit that helped provide education to the poor and needy in the streets of India. This was mainly due to the nature of the topic that I was discussing in this essay. I viewed the assignment of 'Social Engagement/Activism' from the stance of charities and I leveraged my prior experience in this field. I planned to use many statistical data files as well as imagery to further bolster my point, initially. However, I was unable to do so as I deviated from my initial focus which was on economics and the dwindling employment rates. Instead, I decided to divert my attention towards historical evidence and events that mirrored the contemporary financial and economic times.

*To shed more light on what activism meant and its modern day interpretation, I quoted and referenced works of great political leaders who acted bravely for the benefit of society. These leaders include Martin Luther King Jr. and his fight for Civil Rights for all African-American people. I also used examples from Frederick Douglass's memoirs to complement King's instances of struggle for both his own identity and for the welfare of his community. Finally, I used samples from Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace* to bring the economics side of things into my essay. I tried to invoke the same sympathy with the readers as he did with his book.*

Finally, I felt my essay was a nice amalgamation of what I have learnt during the last few weeks of my writing course. I have tried to include an adequate number of pictures and graphs to depict my point and to keep the reader entertained with some visual stimulation. By writing this essay I can see how far I have come by taking this course. I was able to write this assignment more fluidly without having to keep thinking of new ideas and topics. My vocabulary has also greatly improved by continuously writing essays throughout the semester. I hope that this learning process continues throughout my life and I can keep writing critically and analytically to improve myself and my audience.

IMPLICATIONS

The use of new media, combined with readings about community and culture, and navigated through blog reflection writing and the construction of the final e-portfolio, encouraged my students to have the confidence and to build the resources to be active, community oriented, and engaged citizens in the world. Scaffolding ideas, topics, and assignments helped students develop thinking and practical skills while also constructing active portfolios of their own work that they could save or use further after the semester ended. It seems clear that introducing students to new ways of using media can have enormously beneficial consequences. Students are already involved with media, and the final e-portfolio assignment helped them to navigate that relationship in more critical ways.

After leading students through the process of setting up blogs and turning those into whole portfolios, I more firmly believe there is no turning back to earlier ways of teaching. The class framed around is-

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sues of community and citizenship—and including discussion of social media and other contemporary technology topics—seemed to logically include public internet writing in the end. During the semester we read from articles posted on the class WordPress site which included links to other articles and information. Students did most of their own writing in Word documents and then uploaded those to the class Canvas site. Additionally, adding their writing to the public blog space extended their audience beyond the instructor and encouraged students to think of themselves as writers and thinkers in a larger public context. After discussing contemporary social issues during the semester, students then situated themselves in relation to topics of their choosing to construct their final projects, making them more engaged in personalizing those projects.

This approach thus offered a complex rhetorical context, giving the students a more mature sense of purpose, audience, and personal ethos as the writers and designers of their own texts in the world. This also positioned them as active citizens in the world, thinking and acting through writing, and offering persuasive thought-pieces for public consumption. The course content, student involvement, and integration of the various teaching strategies showed the importance of pedagogy in relation to practice. A critical pedagogy helped to engage students in their own learning and making processes. The integration of media as subject of study (e.g. class discussion of social media) as well as a tool for the construction of the final portfolio projects reiterated in practice what the theories outlined above described. Students benefited from active participation as well as became, to some degree, more practiced users of internet technologies across various modes of reading and writing. Development of media savvy and practical skills generally benefited rather than resulted in negative consequences for students.

CONCLUSION

In *The Rise of Writing*, Deborah Brandt (2014) explains how people are spending more of their work-day time communicating through writing, and that workers are increasingly expected to write in a variety of forms and media on a daily basis. As she explains:

While writing has always been used for work, more and more people are now involved in it and spend more time at it. Writing as a dominant form of labor means that for the first time in the history of mass literacy, writing has become a major form of mass literate experience. So rapacious are the production pressures on writing, in fact, that they are redefining reading, as people increasingly read from the posture of the writing, from inside acts of writing, as they respond to others, research, edit, or review other people's writing or search for styles or approaches to borrow and use in their own writing. (p. 17)

Giving students the tools to develop the kinds of skills outlined by Brandt will assist them in moving through their work as students, and eventually as professionals, in a highly mediated world. Reading and writing strategies are continually in process, and as writing teachers we are in a good position to help students build awareness and technical capabilities. These skills and technologies, however, should also be considered within a larger cultural context in which critical thinking and analysis play crucial roles.

Stuart Hall describes “culture” not as a set of things but as “a set of practices.” This means that “culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings ... between the members of a society or group” (p. 2). People contextualized within the same or similar cultural contexts may then “interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world,

in ways which will be understood by each other.” This is how meaning is produced and circulated, and in turn, these similarities in ways of meaning-making propagate and maintain culture. As Hall further explains, “meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part. In a sense, this is the most privileged, though often most neglected, site of culture and meaning.” It is also important to consider how culture is “produced in a variety of different *media*; especially ... in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history” (p. 3). Invention of new media, and the quickly changing uses of and relationships with media, affect our responsibilities as teachers, students, citizens, and participants in this larger cultural context. Reading, writing, and critical thinking have taken on new forms and morphed into processes that are similar to, and yet different from, those of the past.

But these are not things I can simply *tell* my students. I have learned that students learn best when they make and construct meaning on their own terms. I can set up the structure and context, and then I can facilitate their practices of engagement. This is what Donaldson (2014) refers to as “authorship learning”:

The core elements of authorship learning include multiple senses of authorship, including students authoring their creations, students authoring their own meanings and understandings, students engaging in self-authorship, and broader public authorship ... Other key aspects of authorship learning include student ownership of learning, authentic audiences, and metacognitive practices. These aspects emerge from research and the experience of educators: students learn best when they construct their own meaning. This is facilitated most powerfully through a process of having them construct meaningful physical or digital things in the real world which are intended for a real audience, and these artifacts are constructed in collaboration with others. (para. 11)

The move from writing on paper with an individual instructor as audience, to writing for a larger audience of peers and a public audience online, models the potential for a democratic, community oriented, critical literacy in practice. As Berlin (2003) asserts, “literacy enables the individual to understand that the conditions of experience are made by human agents and thus can be remade by human agents. Furthermore, this making and remaking take place in communities, in social collections” (p. 110). The democratic classroom can model this social space, provide students the opportunity to develop writing skills, and encourage them to become critically literate in regard to how individuals are shaped by, and can shape, culture. The writing classroom in the 21st Century can thus give students access to the practices that will enable them to be collaborative and community-oriented citizens in a technologically complex world.

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