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## Sustaining Composition: Studying Content-Based, Ecological, and Economical Sustainability of Open-Source Textbooks Through *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*



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Abstract: Writing programs in institutions of higher education work to prepare students for real-world writing within any field of study. The composition of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* offers an open-source text for students, teachers, and policy-makers at all levels. Exposure to an open space for learning encourages access to information, reinforcing the opportunity for transfer of knowledge beyond first year writing. This review closely examines the economical, ecological, and content-based sustainability inherent in the first two volumes of Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky's *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* and the potential future of open-source textbooks for first year writing classrooms.

Lowe, Charles, and Pavel Zemliansky. *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*. Vol. 1. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor, 2010. Web. <<http://www.parlorpress.com/writingspaces>>.

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In his [introduction](#) to the first volume of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Robert E. Cummings forces the question: because pop culture is so accessible, does pop culture frequent the minds of our students more than intellectual culture does (xii)? If so, how will open-source textbooks affect the current culture of both our academic and non-academic society? As open-source publishing opts for a digital format, textbooks can be shared without cost to the reader. These textbooks still offer the option for print-based purchase, but encourage free online access, making the texts more ecologically and economically sustainable. After close examination of Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky's edited works, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* [Volume One](#) and [Volume Two](#)—Volumes Three and Four are currently in production—it is apparent that open access to textbooks could exponentially increase the written learning experience for college students and beyond. Furthermore, open-source textbooks might offer a solution to what [Steve Forman](#) labels “[...] a version of global warming in which textbook prices are rising to dangerous levels” (n.p.).

Writing programs in institutions of higher-education work to prepare students for any and all composition genres, educating them for real-world application within any field of study. Research on Writing About Writing began in hopes of educating students about all facets of writing, rather than teaching them to write only within a specified field or format. The recently developed Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), National Writing Project (NWP), and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)'s [Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing](#) is slowly being integrated at a variety of composition learning levels in order to reinforce the aforementioned transfer of knowledge. The *Framework* “[...] describes habits of mind and experiences with writing, reading, and critical analysis that serve as foundations for writing in [all] college-level, credit-bearing courses [and beyond]” (2). Parallel, the composition of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* offers an open-source composition text for students, teachers, and policy-makers of all levels. Exposure to an open space for learning and knowledge encourages student access to information before, during, and after individual classes begin and conclude, much like the *Framework for Success*. Work like that of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* could aide Writing Across the Curriculum goals, as well as reinforce the *Framework's* “habits of mind” in each and every writing course. Furthermore, open-source textbooks like this one offer some solution to the ecological and economic textbook

sustainability issues prevalent in the academy.

A 1986 article by Jeremy Bulow addressing economic sustainability defines planned obsolescence “[...] as the production of goods with uneconomically short useful lives so that customers will have to make repeat purchases” (729); further, he notes that some firms will go so far as to pay more to create a product that will deteriorate faster (730). College textbooks seemingly follow this model: producing edition after edition of what appears to be the same textbook. To some extent, that perspective on excess textbook production may be true; however, in his piece, *Textbook Publishing: An Ecological View*, Steve Forman addresses the need for some of these periodic textbook changes. Forman also makes the straightforward claim that some publishers simply choose to reproduce new editions or replicate those “paint-by-the-numbers-textbooks” to avoid the costly potential failure in trying to launch something new (n.p.). While we cannot fault publishers for attempting smart economical moves in an extremely expensive industry, we must also be wary of the ecological and economical sustainability of such decision-making.

According to the Government Accountability Office report of 2005 conducted by the state of Oregon, students, on average, spend approximately \$900 on textbooks per year (Pollitz and Christie n.p.). John Pollitz and Anne Christie spend the majority of their article, [The High Cost of Textbooks: A Convergence of Academic Libraries, Campus Bookstores, Publishers?](#) discussing what they label “the spiraling inflation in the cost of textbooks” (n.p.) and possible solutions to the unsustainable model that is the current textbook industry. They cite that “College textbook prices have risen at twice the inflation rate since the 1980s, averaging 6% per year,” and “[n]ew editions with minimal alterations are coming out at a faster rate compared to cycles 10 to 20 years ago” (n.p.). Not only is this rising industry extremely unsustainable in relation to the economic realities of the college student population, but it can also be considered unsustainable in regards to ecology. Excessive revising and reprinting as well as an increase in technological and instructional production aides—which also eventually have to break down—produce more and more electronic and paper waste for our country. Some authors like Toby Miller and Richard Maxwell claim that the often-ignored excess of media waste is a large addition to the already growing problem of climate change. They say, “There is a spectrum of relevant ecological concerns that the field of media studies could confront as ethical challenges in the near future” (332), and they elaborate specifically on the breakdown of certain media products and its negative effect on our world. While some could claim that open-source textbooks do not counteract that unsustainable process since media is necessary to view online textbooks/PDFs, it is clear that the lack of print media on top of the discarded electronic media limits waste and aides in a more ecologically sustainable future for the textbook industry.

Addressing some of the sustainability issues in print-based publishing, the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) released a [text](#) detailing some new approaches to scholarly publishing, including open-access as the primary model of publication. The AAUP admits that much of the funding for this type of publishing space must come from institutions—print texts sell much less when the work is available online for free—but they also contend that this type of publishing model is doable. As an example they claim “[...] the National Academies Press (NAP) and the RAND Corporation make all of their publications openly available. Their financial sustainability models—combining publishing income, chargeback institutional services, and some direct support (offices, payroll services, IT infrastructure)—are useful to sketch out, as a contrast to most university presses’ current business models” (15). The Director of NAP, Barbara Kline Pope, admits that NAP must consistently change their model and their methods in order to maintain a sustainable business that can still afford to share a constant flow of information to their market (15-16); however, because of the make-up of this model, consistent change is indeed possible. Furthermore, based on the introductory claims of AAUP that “Monographs remain largely static objects, isolated from the interconnections of social computing, instead of being vibrant hubs for discussion and engagement” (3), and Bulow’s perspective on obsolescence, open-source textbooks seemingly overturn many negative aspects bordering ecological, economical, and even content-based sustainability still prevalent in the print-based publishing model. As we can see in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, that ecological and economical move toward sustainability is possible through the free source of Parlor Press’s online website. If, however, students chose to print the text (as some often do) the work would become significantly less ecologically sustainable. Similarly, E-Readers are a more modern technological advancement; some students would benefit from this type of learning, and others (both traditional and non-traditional students) would not. Taking into account these small constraints, some colleges and universities would likely decline the use of this textbook for first year composition. However, considering the content-based additions that *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, also has to offer, many may adopt some of the four volumes for learning and teaching first year writing, at least as supplementary text.

In the first volume of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, L. Lennie Irvin’s chapter *What is Academic Writing?* addresses content-based sustainability in creating a conversation with his audience, much like the ongoing conversation that open-source textbooks could offer. Irvin first works to dispel common myths that run rampant in composition classrooms when he claims there are no “paint by numbers” steps to the correct way to write (4).

Similarly, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* moves away from what Steve Forman addresses as that “paint by numbers” process of publishing (n.p.) and begs to be seen in a different light. The format and tone for this particular piece—and in reality, the whole textbook—are what speak to the reader, be it a first year writing student or professor or institutional WPA. The composition of this text is extremely approachable. Irvin invites the reader to “grab a cup of coffee or diet coke” and just explore academic writing with him (4). The tone of his text invites you in, begs for open conversation and social construction, rather than a top-down instructional hierarchy that implies one individual's view is right and the other's is wrong. Further, Irvin offers this information in an intelligent, but never abstract way. He discusses the path of learning to write at the college level: “We will start by clearing up some of those wild misconceptions people often arrive at college possessing. Then we will dig more deeply into the components of the academic writing situation and nature of the writing task” (4). In that regard, Irvin is inviting exactly what we need into the composition classroom: an endless supply of knowledge that is both accessible and ever changing—a conversation where an ending seems unlikely. Furthermore, as Irvin dispels myths on writing within composition, he and others (see [Hinton](#), [Carroll](#), [Jones](#), [Reid](#), and [Savini](#)) dispel myths on appropriate publishing tactics, while instructing on best composition tools and working toward a more sustainable future for composition.

Alongside the ecological and economically sound initiatives discussed prior, much like the *Framework for Success*, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* offers a more sustainable future for compositionists as well. The “habits of mind” detailed in the *Framework* document discuss growing and learning continuously and potentially decreasing the transfer of knowledge gap. The document states, “[...] students who develop these habits of mind approach learning from an active stance. These habits help students succeed in a variety of fields and disciplines. They are cultivated both inside and outside school” (4). Along with its work as an open-source textbook, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* could be used in a similar way, opening up the discussion of composition skills between fields of study and levels of schooling and learning. The textbook does not contain detailed directions of how students *have* to write in order to succeed, nor does it offer step-by-step instructions on how to teach first year writing. Instead, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* does something different; it offers a conversation detailing most everything first year writing students need to know in order to succeed in college-level writing and beyond.

*Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* is in part a framework itself, a framework for learning writing—chapters work mainly to overturn common misconceptions of college-level writing and to broach topics first year writing textbooks don't generally cover, topics like [I need you to say 'I': Why First Person Is Important in College Writing](#), and [The Inspired Writer vs. the Real Writer](#). The content of the former is apparent in the title, arguing against the common belief that the personal pronoun has no place in academic writing. The latter, however, begs for further analysis here; Sarah Allen's chapter discusses why we write and, further, what the assumptions are of writers and professors of writing. She references her own classroom and one particular student's view that all composition professors are “inspired” writers, “who generate perfect prose without the frustrating process of revision or failure” (36). Further she claims

My student, quoted above, seems to suggest that I am good at writing because I like doing it. But I'd have to disagree on at least two points: First, I wouldn't describe my feelings toward writing as being a “like” kind of thing. It's more of an agonistic kind of thing. Second, I am not “good” at writing, if being good at it means that the words, the paragraphs, the pages come easily. (34-35)

Allen makes an interesting move here, claiming that it is possible for students, and even sometimes professors of writing, to dislike or have difficulty writing. Generally speaking, first year writing textbooks don't take the time or space to discuss a professor's perspective on writing, but maybe they should. Chapters like this one allow the student to see a realistic view of writing—not every professor “skip[s] gleefully to [his or her] computer [every day]” (34). *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* allows a conversation to take place between the roles of student and professor without the fear of grade involvement. Perhaps it's the open-source aspect of the text that allows for such a broad range of topics for discussion; perhaps it's simply the way the authors chose to compose the textbook. Either way, it opens up discussion beyond the essay or MLA guidelines, allowing a different perspective to enter the first year writing conversation. Both the *Framework for Success* and *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* encourage a consistent writing process, rather than a temporary perspective based upon individual grade-levels. Broadening the general definition of sustainability, this textbook would encourage sustainable writing practices through the content of the text in learning and understanding writing, not just learning how to write. As Irvin puts it, “Your success with academic writing depends upon how well you understand what you are doing as you write and then how you approach the writing task” (16). In this sense, students could apply this knowledge at any level of learning, as well as the endless opportunities that open-source learning and teaching offer through multiple publishing formats and future editions.

In Volume Two of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Paul Lynch, in his piece [The Sixth Paragraph: A Re-](#)

[Vision of the Essay](#), expands the conversation to students and teachers alike, to incorporate discussions that aren't generally broached in composition textbooks. His savvy writing skills and tone reinforce his argument to move away from the state-mandated way of teaching writing along with the five-paragraph essay. His text even goes so far as to claim "[a]cademic writing should make an argument; arguments should have reasons; reasons should be based on evidence. But as you can see, the [five-paragraph-essay] form tends to straitjacket writing: it fits everyone, but once you're in it, you can't really move" (288). This more colloquial way of teaching writing again encourages students to move away from that "paint by number" instructional writing and, instead, to attempt to fully understand writing from a variety of perspectives. Again, this text encourages a student/teacher conversation, rather than seemingly hierarchical instructional methods. This open-source method and content is sustainable in the sense that the lessons and procedures can be replicated and reinforced through consistent usage before, during, and after college composition courses.

*Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* is a guideline for most everything students will come across in learning to write. It offers a resource for those who have forgotten necessary writing techniques, individuals who are just learning to write at a college-level, and policy-makers that need to refresh their knowledge on what is current in the paradigm. This text offers a perspective that every student, teacher, and policy-maker should at least encounter. The necessity of a text like this in our paradigm (especially in the new-age of documents like the *Framework for Success*) is extensive: it encompasses content-based sustainable practices where conversations on composition are free, available, and on-going; ecological sustainable practices, helping our paradigm to move away from excessive production and waste; and economical sustainability, allowing our students, teachers, policy-makers, and anyone who wishes to learn the open opportunity for knowledge. Textbooks are expensive; this one is a necessary addition to any library, and even better, it's free.

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