

# Technologies for Transcending a Focus on Error: Blogs and Democratic Aspirations in First-Year Composition

Cheryl C. Smith

*ABSTRACT: How are the internet and its online spaces for open exchange changing reading and writing practices, and how can we capitalize on these changes in composition instruction? This article traces the author's experiment with blogging in her first-year writing class and considers how and why blogs help students negotiate the unfamiliar demands of college writing and enter into a more democratic arena for learning where their voices and arguments gain fuller, freer expression. In particular, the article proposes that the space of the blog, which is familiar to many students, opens up possibilities for risk-taking and interactivity that teach important lessons about the role of error and audience response in the composing process. As students rethink and revise their initial ideas, working off one another's comments, they develop more authority as critics with valued opinions and voice and let go of some of their fear about making mistakes that can prevent inexperienced writers from discovering and communicating their best arguments. By embracing the inventive and often messy space of blogs in composition instruction, students and teachers alike can evolve a new view of what it means to learn to write—and write effectively—in academic settings.*

*KEYWORDS: blog; first-year writing; democracy and education; error*

With the advent of Web 2.0, the perceived “second generation” of web-based communities, the internet has been transformed from a place primarily to retrieve information to a network for advancing and exchanging it, inviting more open participation, interaction, and creative expression. Computer users have thus moved from working independently toward interrelating in zones like chat rooms, blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. As a result of the widespread use and influence of these Web 2.0 platforms, reading and writing practices are changing, especially for the younger generation. Students today write more, but in less conventionally academic ways, than

---

**Cheryl C. Smith** is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Baruch College, where she teaches writing and American literature. Her recent articles are on Anne Hutchinson, the English department's role in general education reform, and Mina Shaughnessy's legacy. She has an article forthcoming on teaching Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in first-year composition courses and is co-editing the book *Transformations in Higher Education: Designing Creative Sites for Teaching and Learning*.

students only a decade ago, and they arrive on our campuses with entirely new skills sets and a new relationship to composition and expression.

Significantly, these new literacy modes and skills are not limited to any one type of college writer. Students at all levels, from basic to advanced, and with all degrees of academic experience, are likely to have had their minds and writing styles impacted by their exposure to technology. The impact is in fact so widespread that N. Katherine Hayles argues we are “in the midst of a generational shift in cognitive styles” (187). She explains the shift as the move away from deep attention—common in the humanities and characterized by focusing on a single object for extended time—toward hyper attention, “characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (187). In this age of internet authorship, students are developing complicated writing histories marked by quick connections and the potential for invention. Meanwhile, composition scholars remain deeply invested in studying difference. We highlight the unique needs and abilities of today’s students along increasingly nuanced scales of multilingualism, for instance, and the category of basic writer expands to contain our understanding of the changing undergraduate population. Today, technology spans many of these differences. Basic writers are as likely as their peers to come to college with a determining Web 2.0 fluency, along with well-honed hyper attention. Thus, in one important respect—in relation to technology and its impact on writing—the differences between students’ language use and learning styles can matter less than the differences between our students and ourselves.

Further, all students are equally likely to feel threatened and insecure as they transition into college classrooms and face new academic expectations—and us—for the first time. A common response to such feelings of uncertainty is for students to eschew risk and error and take what they see as the safest route to meet the demands, both real and perceived, of their new environment, even though risk and error are often the best routes to learning. At the same time, teachers can exacerbate student anxieties with their own shortsighted or limited focus on error and correction. Thus, as Mina Shaughnessy argues in *Errors and Expectations*, the problem of error has as much to do with faculty beliefs and attitudes as it does with student writing. She insists that instead of mechanically correcting (and becoming frustrated by) students’ mistakes, educators should pay attention to the actual capacities of students in order to appreciate the origin and meaning of their mistakes and use that knowledge to work with rather than against their abilities. She

urges us to resist quickly assessing and just as quickly dismissing new students based on poor performance on entrance exams that do not adequately reflect their experiences with language, both in and out of school. Her book thus provides a means by which schools can articulate approaches to error that account for nuances in students' educational and personal histories. In Shaughnessy's hands, error becomes a tool for understanding students and learning to work with them more effectively.

First-year composition courses—small, intimate, intensive, and built around drafting and revision—are particularly well-positioned to use error as a tool for helping students come to terms with its role in writing and learning, and blogs can be instrumental in this process. As an online arena where error, language play, and invention are not only accommodated but actively incorporated, blogs are a surprisingly straightforward way to negotiate the tensions of error. They add a new platform for writing that increases opportunities for student-driven expression, facilitate and energize the processes of collective brainstorming and peer review, stimulate creativity and class community, and supplement more traditional platforms for writing without supplanting or detracting from them. Using a familiar, flexible, lively Web 2.0 platform engages new college students in the act of writing as necessarily flawed and changeable yet interactive, powerfully creative, mentally challenging, and intellectually transformative.

To move closer to the ideal of writing as both open to error and intellectually transformative, we have to strike a balance between giving students some access to comfort zones, where they can examine and validate their own experiences and insights, while still daring them to venture beyond the known and familiar. Richard E. Miller talks about this challenge as bringing students to “the edge of the unknown” (“Fear” 37) or “the limits of [the mind’s] own understanding” (“Impertinent” 152). For Miller, to operate at these edges and limits is to “encounter your own ignorance” (“Impertinent” 156). Encountering or admitting to our ignorance is not something many of us are particularly eager to do; first-year students, who often feel uniquely ignorant of their new surroundings and expectations to begin with, may especially resist confronting the limits of their understanding, particularly in the foreign land of freshman year. Yet it is precisely this edge of the unknown where most first-year college coursework necessarily lives: in the margin of entry into a new level of learning where beginning college students struggle to articulate their maturing scholarly and social identities.

So how can first-year composition bring students to the edge of the unknown without alienating and losing them, especially those basic writers

who often face the greatest sense of being out of place, who may feel particularly threatened and insecure in their new environment, and who are most at risk for failure? How do we negotiate the tension between making students feel a comfortable sense of belonging in college and challenging them: getting them outside their comfort zones to a place where they test out new ideas, take risks, ask questions, voice opinions, and interact with people in new ways? Blogs provide a timely answer to these questions. While my main purpose here is to explore the impact of changing literacy practices on higher education—how reading and writing habits are evolving and how and why college educators should tap into new spaces being created for writing—I also want to position first-year writers—my own students—in the context of all the changes in order to advance a pedagogy of blogging as a productive response to these changes. Though the class I will discuss was a typical group of first-year composition students, not a basic writing class, I argue that blogs have a unique potential to free the writer's voice that can especially empower those students who lack confidence in their language skills or are otherwise struggling. Further, by giving participants equal access to a public voice in a forum that is familiar to many young people, blogs create a safe place for risk-taking and error, making it less likely that students will disengage in the face of the challenging transition into college expectations.

### **Freedom to Make Mistakes: Working on the Boundary of Error**

Mike Rose has another way of talking about Miller's edge of the unknown. Rose figures it as a boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar and argues that we do not have to bring new college students to the edge; they already live there. As they struggle at the boundary that defines the transition into college, they naturally make more mistakes. "Before we shake our heads at these errors," Rose advises, "we should also consider the possibility that many such . . . bumbles are signs of growth, a stretching beyond what college freshmen can comfortably do" (188). The challenge with the boundary of student ability and its inherent bumbles is learning to see error as a site for productive exploration from which to challenge students and design more effective initiatives, assignments, and activities. That is, teachers have to find ways to critically engage with the errors new students commonly make. In my own first-year classes, I invariably see students make mistakes that I imagine are familiar to many composition teachers. For instance, my students have trouble moving beyond merely reading a text to interpreting its meaning or articulating an informed opinion about it; when they provide

evidence for an argument, they stop short at summary; they may produce grammatically convoluted prose that reflects unclear or underdeveloped ideas; or their essays may be unfocused or poorly organized. According to Rose, these sorts of missteps are integral to the process of learning: “Error,” he says, “marks the place where education begins” (189).

Students, however, generally strive *not* to make mistakes. Their goal, understandably, is to get it right. Before they even think about striking out for new ideas, taking risks, and producing less-than-perfect first drafts in order to find unexpected, richer arguments, they tend to revert to what they know: that overly simple summary, for example. At the same time, they waste a lot of time trying to analyze the teacher. What is she looking for? What does she mean by “argue,” “analyze,” and “provide evidence”? Most importantly, how can I get an “A” on this paper? Students will often try to repeat back the main points of class discussions or mimic an elevated mode of language that, to their minds, seems more “college-like,” while their pursuit of a grade keeps them prone to take what they see as the safer, more correct, path.

Unfortunately, the job of encouraging students to take risks is not necessarily facilitated by the dynamics of the traditional classroom. In his influential article, “Composition and the Circulation of Writing,” John Trimbur argues that the classroom can be one of the most vexed sites for learning because of the way it reinstates the attitudes and rituals of middle-class family life, which feed directly into students’ resistance to error. Trimbur seeks “to transcend the domestic space of the writing classroom” (191), where teachers act *in loco parentis* to regulate and monitor the products of students’ composition. In this “domestic space,” the student assumes the role of a child called to account for his or her knowledge and the teacher assumes the role of a powerful parent figure poised, however benevolently, to judge. To replace this model, Trimbur promotes an instruction that focuses less on the end product—the student essay—and more on the “complex delivery systems through which writing circulates” (190). He thus resists a static notion of learning, in which the goal is a final paper that gets turned in for a grade, and instead prioritizes the development and circulation of ideas, which remain open to refinement and change. Trimbur also wants writing classrooms to tap into the channels through which writing circulates in order to heighten students’ awareness of how they might use such channels to gain a voice in civic life. He frames this approach as one driven by “a democratic aspiration” for teaching that would encourage instructors to “devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions,

and knowledge and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (190).

If the challenge to teachers is to create platforms for writing that explore diverse possibilities for making meaning in the public sphere, Trimbur’s call seems particularly timely. We now have access to a whole new arena for communication via the web networks that have literally exploded in the eight years since Trimbur published his essay. In this relatively short time, Web 2.0 has radically altered the terrain of reading and writing and has real potential to further democratize literacy learning, reaching student writing where it lives: in the new social networks of the internet. Most students have grown up reading and writing to social networking sites, message boards, blogs, and other online forums. Of these spaces, blogs are especially well-suited to classroom use. Educational proponents of blogs see them as highly democratic forums for writing (Nelson and Fernheimer 3; Bloch and Crosby) that highlight rather than elide the importance of the author (Bloch 129) and encourage interactive communication (Ferdig and Trammel 16).<sup>1</sup> These qualities that proponents attribute to blogs—free and open expression, promotion of the author, and interactive engagement with an audience—naturally resonate with many compositionists. Because anyone can post and claim a public voice in blogs, they fulfill Trimbur’s democratic aspirations for promoting the civic potential of student expression. Even online course management systems like Blackboard or WebCT, which are by nature restricted by a professor’s design and controls, do not come close to the expansive potential of blogs, which are open to broad audiences and shaped by both writers’ creative impulses and audience response. As flexible, familiar platforms, blogs lend power to the author and may especially empower inexperienced writers who often feel uncomfortable with academic discourse but more at home with internet writing. At the same time, the open-forum quality of blogs defines them as especially democratic, connecting authors with larger audiences engaged in vibrant, ongoing conversations.

Despite all these positive qualities, I was frankly nervous about retooling my familiar composition class around unfamiliar technology. I rarely read blogs, had never written one myself, and had never even visited a site like MySpace. I had one significant advantage on my side, however; my college’s Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program offers individualized support for faculty who wish to incorporate blogs into the classroom.<sup>2</sup> Given access to a graduate writing fellow with expertise in blog creation and maintenance, I felt confident enough to forge ahead. After consulting with my writing fellow, I opted to have one communal class blog rather than individual or

small-group blogs connected to a central class site. Though I could see the creative benefits of multiple, individually-designed blogs interacting with one another, I decided that one communal blog would more effectively develop class community and be a vehicle for enhancing the peer review process that I am always looking to improve. I wanted to create a space for writing that was less imposing, less structured, and less high stakes than a typical writing assignment, a space that would belong more fully to the students. The question of how to give students a sense of ownership over the blog, however, was a tough one, since I still wanted the blog to fulfill certain course goals, particularly those related to thesis development, use of evidence, and peer review. I hoped to encourage playfulness and freedom of expression, but I did not want entirely random, undirected posts. I wanted the blog to lead students toward more reflective, analytical writing. Thus, I decided to make blogs part of a variety of pre-writing exercises I called “meditations,” which would lead up to the three longer, formal essays.

While all these goals drove my interest in using a class blog, one of my primary motivations was to free student voice and create a space for exploration—even, and perhaps particularly, failed exploration. I wanted students to try on writerly identities, try out ideas and claims, and test different styles for approaching those claims. For instance, they might at first be irreverent or flippant about their subject and then make an earnest call to action, gauging audience response to each approach. Along the way, they could write as much or as little as they wanted. I also hoped that the blog would combat the problem of stultified prose—tentative essays written solely for external motivation and lacking inspiration—that can be common in student writing. In such timid and frequently flat writing, sentences get long and convoluted, the main subject and verb hide behind drawn-out introductory clauses, and claims tend toward safer, highly general, history-of-the-world truisms. Instead of asserting a point or opinion, the author searches for validation in large, empty social “truths” about the condition of man or the ways of the world. Adding to the problem, students are often so afraid to break certain perceived rules of writing—never start a sentence with “and,” “but,” or “because;” never use the passive voice or first person “I”—that their prose can lack variety and flair. In molding their work to some mythical standard of correctness, neither their voice nor their authentic arguments have much of a chance to emerge. The blog, I imagined, could demythologize college writing, making it more user-friendly.

To accommodate and empower my students’ developing voices and arguments, I asked them to write a profile of themselves as writers for their

first blog. I wanted them to explore and validate their feelings—both good and bad—about writing. I told them their profile should 1) briefly outline their past experiences with writing, 2) develop one of those experiences into a more complete image of who they are as writers, and 3) discuss what kind of writers they hope to become. I prompted them to be as specific as possible (though they could be brief), explaining their relationship to writing through anecdotes of actual experiences. Finally, I instructed them to comment on at least one of their classmates' blogs. Here is the first paragraph of the inaugural post:

Write a profile of yourself as a writer? Well, that's an interesting topic for a blog. I believe that when one reads what it is that someone else wrote they will be able to judge exactly what kind of writer he or she is. A person's diction, their observation of the rules of grammar; everything that makes them a writer is displayed most truly in their blogs (or diaries). A report is one thing but when there is no force commanding a person to write they can let their ideas flow without fear of ridicule or judgment. While this is technically an assignment I don't see it as such. I've been spilling my thoughts on blogs for ages and so this is much easier than, say, writing a 4 page analysis on why Raskolnikov isn't a tragic hero. I was just interrupted by my friend who asked me for someone's email. Let me begin by stating this about myself as a writer: I hate being interrupted—my train of thought crashes.<sup>3</sup>

The writer continues for another seven paragraphs, at one point commenting on how his posts to his personal blog, which he shares with "only one other person," often run as long as five pages. He discusses coming to the U.S. from Russia as a child, knowing only one word of English (hello), being told in the third grade that he needed a language tutor to catch up to the other students, and ultimately acquiring such a precocious vocabulary that he was accused by more than one teacher of copying his written assignments. He speaks about using writing as a form of protest in school and the importance of finding a topic that the writer authentically cares about. And though he confidently asserts, "I believe I made it clear that I am a writer," he admits to his foibles: "terrible" spelling and "atrocious" grammar skills. He concedes: "I'm not even sure where to stick semi-colons, despite my using them consistently throughout this blog. In addition, the correct use of commas eludes me. I also find that I ramble to ridiculous proportions."

I was afraid such a long, detailed, entertaining blog would intimidate



the other students, but instead it seemed to inspire them. One posted the following comment:

. . . Wow. I have never read an essay like this before. An essay where someone just reveals the amazing writer they are. I can actually “see” that you were not writing this for an assignment, but you were writing for yourself. And I definitely agree with you. Your best work only comes when you are not writing to do a report or for others, but when you are writing for yourself. By writing for yourself, you are allowing yourself to actually think about what you want to write. And that is the best part about it. You get to write what you want, not what someone else wants. After reading your essay (I actually read this whole thing. Might have been very long, but it was interesting), I have to say you are an amazing writer. I would not have guessed that you have bad grammar or that you are bad at spelling.

I was immediately struck by the “chatty” style of this comment. It very closely captures the writer’s train of thought and his natural quality of speaking, in part by flouting those rules of writing that students are so afraid to break. He begins his passage with an ellipsis, starts sentences with “and,” and includes sentence fragments and a parenthetical aside—bold moves, especially for his first college writing assignment. Further, he does not compose an overly general response but instead directly engages with specific details, including the blogger’s claims of having poor grammar and spelling and his argument that writing in response to assignments produces less authentic prose because the writer is afraid of “ridicule or judgment.” The commenter concurs, adding, “By writing for yourself, you are allowing yourself to actually think about what you want to write,” a fairly profound statement about the composing process of thinking and questioning, freewriting, drafting, and revising and its ability to inspire fresh ideas and to clarify thought. In this exchange, then, students were beginning to discuss the dynamics of composition. Further, the stultified prose problem was either nearly gone or being actively interrogated, without any prompting by me. I saw considerably less posturing and more relaxed, natural writing.

Yet while they relaxed on the blog, they took it seriously. They referred to one another’s posts as “essays” and wrote to the space earnestly, crafting what indeed amounted to mini-essays with beginnings, middles, ends, and solid evidence. At the same time, they seemed quite willing to let their guard

down and write more freely than they might otherwise write for school, with little self-editing. While this produced grammatical and mechanical mistakes that might have been edited out of more formal assignments, I found that students' blogs were comparable to their other work in terms of number and type of errors. And the blogs provided an organic forum for discussing issues such as the ubiquitous question of correctness that writers struggle with. For instance, most students confessed in their writing profiles that they did not consider themselves to be good writers—but they did not stop there. They explored specific struggles, shaping our future discussions of what makes writing difficult and what makes it work:

- When it comes to essays, and papers it's difficult for me to write because I tend to feel pressured to write well, instead of writing how I feel.
- . . . writing has always been my foe, enemy, nemesis, and whatever other bad names you can think of to give it. . . . My parents would asked if I'm trying hard enough, but I would simply tell them that I think I'm trying a little too hard.
- I have this bad habit of constantly revising my writing because I'm never satisfied with it. Sometimes I wind up modifying my entire paper. I guess you can say I'm a perfectionist and . . . I care too much about what others think of me.
- I was born and raised in America but was put into ESL when I was in first grade. Embarrassing I know. I liked to draw I was never a number person or a letter person. I know what your thinking "she's Asian and she hates math?!" . . . I do worry about grammar which is probably the reason why I'm constantly reading my essays over and over, paranoid that I might make some silly mistakes.
- In my junior year . . . an English teacher remarked on my style in class during review for the Regents [standardized tests for high school students in New York] one day. He said "[His] style is good because it's what the grader wants to see, he tells you what he's going to talk about in the intro. Then he analyzes those topics in his body, very clear." I didn't really take this as a compliment. The way in which he said it described my writing perfectly, but I really didn't like that. "Very clear", to me meant boring and predictable.

Posts like these bring out a number of issues students face in college composition: the fear that writing what one feels will not be good enough, the

pressure to be perfect and try “a little too hard,” and the perceived tension between clarity and creativity—if it is clear, it can not be original or interesting. I made a list of such issues drawn from students’ blogs and we talked about them in the next class session. We thus began to address topics that I planned to focus on throughout the semester anyway, but I could broach them using the students’ own insights as the starting point. For example, beginning with the blogs that talked about being overly obsessive about rereading and revising one’s work, I asked the class: What is the purpose of revision? How much revision should a writer do? How much is too much? Does revision ever backfire, making a piece of writing less effective? Because discussion began from their own reflections about the often-scary process of writing and everyone had already read and commented on each other’s blogs, students had a sense of ownership in the discussion.

This ownership led to the quick development of a coherent class community. Blogging enabled my students to bounce ideas off one another and develop new trains of thought that they might not have considered on their own. It also helped them think about how they communicate in different arenas and to various audiences. My students may have been living on the edge of their college experience, struggling to make the difficult transition into new modes of knowing and communicating, but they were not alone. The blog invited them to collectively voice their concerns, even as it welcomed all unpolished thoughts and first attempts. Connecting their prior academic experiences, as well as their lives outside the academy, with the work they were being asked to do in their first semester of college, students saw their own histories as a legitimate part of college. Blogs encouraged students to insert themselves—their voices and authentic arguments—into developing academic narratives, “mistakes” included.

### **Shuttling Between Contexts and Toward Student Voice: New Platforms for New College Writers**

Aligning the familiar world of students’ lived experiences with the world of school is not a new idea, but technology suggests new ways and reasons for doing it. Students are using internet forums and tools in their personal lives and often understand the dynamics of online writing spaces better than academic ones. Indeed, this is true to the extent that their computer use is shaping their attention spans and how they process and apply information. Recently, I presented Hayles’ idea of the generational cognitive shift from deep to hyper attention to a colleague, who contended that

if computer-literate students can navigate the complexly networked world of the internet so adroitly, then they should be able to make other cognitive leaps, including the kinds of connections we commonly ask them to make in college classes. One context and its moves, that is, should translate fairly directly to the other. Yet, can we assume that students who can scan a web page and navigate its many links should also be able to find good evidence in a reading and use it to argue the implications of their thesis, or that they should be able to intuit a relationship between their biology class and intro to anthropology? Unfortunately, we cannot know whether students can make these leaps unless we bring a more conscious focus on the evolving channels for communication to our classrooms. Most students do not easily move from reading to evidence to analysis to claims without explicit and logical tools for doing so—along with a lot of practice. In fact, they may often fail to see the interplay between their courses until years later. Likewise, they will probably require direct and repeated exposure to new media in classroom settings in order to make thoughtful connections between internet and academic writing. Given opportunities to make these kinds of connections, students will benefit in multiple ways because their new learning is more meaningfully grounded in their own experiences.

As educators bring the new technologies into academic settings to include the purpose of advancing critical thinking for college, they will also provide fair access to knowledge-making, empowering students as cultural critics with valued opinions. First-year students who find little that is familiar in the new standards and norms of college may feel like its discourses and platforms are not *really* meant for them. Non-traditional or first-generation college students, or those labeled as basic writers or non-native English speakers, may be especially prone to feeling like outsiders. According to James Paul Gee, the potential to equalize both access to high level discourses and success with them is a key benefit of new technologies. He argues that as technology transforms literacy, it creates opportunities for more innovative, democratic teaching and learning. “We are living amidst major changes,” Gee insists, “changes creating new ways with words, new literacies, and new forms of learning. These changes are creating, as well, new relationships and alignments within, between, and among the spheres of family, school, business, and science” (43). The new relationships and alignments affect literacy education because they create “new kinds of people” (43) with new opportunities for advancing their ideas. The networks opened up by Web 2.0 are redrawing routes of access to public expression that precede our classrooms, driving new kinds of students into academia, and challenging us to

develop pedagogies that accommodate and empower them as intellectuals who may take part in the dominant social debates.

Though I am heralding the democratic potential of bringing technology into the classroom, I recognize it is no panacea. Much of the discussion regarding technologies in the classroom is optimistic to the point of waxing utopian about the potential they have to transform literacy learning by creating unique spaces for writing that can be made to accommodate students who may have been limited in or even excluded from more traditional spaces. While non-traditional writing and teaching undoubtedly empower some non-traditional writers and learners, the reality of working with the new tech-savvy writing public in our schools is complicated. The spaces of computer-mediated instruction, not unlike the space of the classroom itself, can be vexed by considerable limits. Web 2.0 and blogs are no exception. Students may not share equal access or exposure to internet forums, making it a challenge to fairly make blogging a central component of a class. Meanwhile, teachers may frame blogs in limited ways: as one type of writing representing one type of intellectual, or more likely social, act that accomplishes one type of learning goal, which ultimately remains peripheral to the primary writing of a course. Or, blogs get associated with one course in the curriculum, most likely first-year composition, perhaps because they fit so easily with composition's longstanding practice of informal writing or because they are not regarded as serious enough for most upper-division courses. As we confront the first wave of historic changes to writing and begin to shape the spaces for technology and literacy instruction, we should remain aware of how and where we are fixing and entering into them.

I remain optimistic yet cautious after my own blog experiment, which necessarily included expanding students' range of knowledge-making within academic and public/ internet forums. But it was certainly not without its problems. Early in the semester, for instance, I took students to a public reading by Edwidge Danticat and asked them to write about the event on our blog. The reading was free to students and required; it was integral to our class discussion, since we were reading one of the author's books in conjunction with our freshman text, Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Yet most students failed to see any value to the reading and instead complained that the event was "not for them," seemed more suited to an audience of "people over 40," and was "frankly boring." I even watched in horror as one student clamored noisily over a row of chairs to avoid passing me when he made an early exit. Of course, students' overall negative impression of the event got full expression on our class blog:

- I was already bored by the time the intro [of the author] was done. . . . I can't exactly write about something I was not conscious for.
- I did not fall asleep, although I would have very much liked to. I believe that as a college freshman I cannot sit in halls and listen to readers for entertainment. It's as simple as that. . . . I would much rather go see *Rent*.
- I just blanked out.

While a handful of students used the blog space to try to engage seriously with the reading, most simply declared it dull and uninteresting. I felt disheartened by the overall class response and began to fear that our blog was becoming a space primarily for venting. It is not so easy to walk that fine line between giving students access to comfort zones, where they can examine and validate their own experiences, and daring them to venture beyond their first responses. I wanted them to feel free to write through their honest reactions, but I also wanted to push them toward the kind of serious, earnest, critical examinations they produced in their first blogs, their writing profiles.

So I posted a blog asking them to speculate on my reasons for taking them to the Danticat reading. What might have been my purpose? How did the reading relate to and add a different perspective on our class work? Then I dedicated a significant portion of the next class to a discussion of the purpose of a liberal arts education, emphasizing the role of events like Danticat's reading in the college experience. As with the blog, however, I faced a challenge in mediating the class discussion. I was unsure how to move students beyond their first impulses and simplest claims toward the kind of reflective, analytical thinking more commonly associated with college-level work without making them feel chastised. The discussion on liberal education seemed to go well overall, but I found that students approached their next couple of blogs with some hesitancy. They seemed to have intuited the message: watch what you say. While setting boundaries on class discussions or writing content is perfectly legitimate, I had unwittingly effected an overly timid attitude in my students. I went from fearing that their attitude was too flippant to seeing it become too cautious.

To help students reclaim the blog space and their own voices, I quickly restructured the second major essay unit around contemporary music. I thought that since students are often already authorities on the topic, or at

least interested in it, the assignment would encourage personal investment and self-expression while also challenging students to do closer readings and more careful, critical analysis of their target text: songs they chose. Their main task was to analyze the lyrics of a song that they felt had an important political message. Leading up to the essay, we read some theoretical and critical pieces on the social impact of music and I played examples of political songs. Then students selected their songs to focus on throughout the rest of the unit, which would include three short meditations, an oral presentation, and a draft and revision of an essay.

Their first charge was to write a blog introducing their songs. I prompted them to embed YouTube videos in their blogs so everyone could listen to one another's choices; our writing fellow prepared a detailed instruction sheet on how to embed the videos. I thought students would struggle with this requirement, but in fact they met it quite easily. For them, the challenging part was to briefly quote and discuss some lyrics that best illustrated their points about the political messages they identified in their songs. Instead of getting into the specifics of targeted lyrics, students took a broad view of the music and its politics. The first blog posted, on "The Cause of Death" by Immortal Technique, typifies this approach:

Immortal Technique is an Underground Hip-hop MC and a political activist. Most of his lyrics focus on socio-political issues such as poverty, religion, and racism. He has collaborated with activist and former death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, and released songs commenting on the George W. Bush administration and its agenda. Songs such as "The Cause of Death" express his views on terrorism and the Iraq War as well as his scorn for the current American government and structure of power. He also discusses the newscast on September 11, 2001 that spoke of bombs planted on the George Washington Bridge and the subsequent arrest of four non-Arabs that suddenly disappeared from news coverage.

Like most of his classmates, this student chose one of his favorite artists and songs. He immediately made it clear that his song had personal resonance to him as a New Yorker of Arab descent. The assignment thus gave the student the opportunity to project a specialist perspective. Going in, he knew quite a bit about his subject and held many opinions on it, and his first blog sticks to what he knew best: the bigger picture of the artist's oeuvre and how the song addresses one particular, personally relevant, political scandal. Yet in focus-

ing on these familiar elements, he fails to attend to the complex lyrics—to take a line and attempt to explain its connotative meaning or examine its symbolic value—as we practiced doing in class with sample songs.

The more interactive spaces of both the blog and the classroom, however, helped nudge the students into their often dense and difficult lyrics. Over the course of the unit, they would come to look at their songs in ways they never had, refine their arguments, and find unexpected ways to communicate their passion for the music. Significantly, students had ample opportunity to get input from classmates and reconsider their ideas because they published their song choices, videos, and commentary a full week and a half before their essay drafts were due. By getting such thorough insight into one another’s topics so early in the unit, the class had time to form a more coherent community of researchers and writers. Further, students could respond to each other and offer tips and information in ways I often could not, since I was less familiar with many of their chosen songs. They were also able to give each other encouragement and ideas for their upcoming oral presentations, which many students were dreading. One student’s comment on the *Immortal Technique* blog illuminates this dynamic of encouragement and idea sharing:

I like the song. . . . I especially like the video and its added content about the “business” that war has become, and its a very profitable business unfortunately. I didn’t think the song was to offensive. We all curse, it’s nothing we haven’t heard before. Besides, if you listen closely at the end he says “father, forgive them”. Good song choice, looking forward to your presentation.

This comment addresses some of the issues that students worried about when I first gave them the assignment. Could they choose songs with questionable lyrics? How offensive is too offensive? What could they say in their presentation that will not already have been said on the blog; how could they keep people interested? Small gestures of support from their peers gave students confidence and pushed them to reconsider their very familiar subject matter in a new light. For example, by putting the word “business” in quotation marks and pointing out the quick, almost throwaway line at the end, the commenter forced the writer away from the big picture that he was defaulting to: the larger social context of 9/11 or the politics of *Immortal Technique*’s music overall. Instead, he nudged the writer toward analyzing the lyrics, a much needed push as students entered



the essay drafting stage.

While helping students accomplish closer, deeper analysis is a goal of many college classes, today's changing reading and writing habits may be making this goal tougher to meet—or at least challenging us to meet it in new ways. Focusing on one fixed text over a long period of time may prove profoundly boring to minds schooled in the hyper attention that Hayles argues is increasingly common among today's internet-savvy writers, who prefer working in bigger, faster-paced, shifting contexts. My students certainly showed a particularly low tolerance for boredom at the Danticat reading. Perhaps their attitude reflected a negative outcome of the shift toward hyper attention. However, their blog writing also demonstrates the shift's positive side. While we may lament the loss of deep attention in our students, hyper attention has its merits. In particular, it cultivates the ability to attend to a variety of angles at once. I believe my students' approach to analysis reflected their naturally broad, inclusive perspectives. It may have been a stretch for them, but they did write their way toward insightful analysis of their song lyrics; they just got there through a different route: by overlaying their classmates' insights and responses with their own views. Students are developing quick minds that are not only unfocused or restless but also agile and broad, able to account for different angles simultaneously and incorporate external influences and ideas. My experience suggests that as students make the shift into hyper attention, we may be arriving at a pedagogical crossroads for rethinking how we define, assign, and recognize analysis.

At the very least, we have arrived at a moment for rethinking how to most meaningfully engage our students' increasingly agile minds. I found that the contemporary music assignment accommodated how my students processed information and viewed their songs. It was not uncommon for them to write posts that, while relatively brief, were nonetheless packed with information and took multiple slants on their target texts. This approach is evidenced by the following blog that, in only a handful of sentences, covers the social conditions surrounding the song's message, the author's personal feelings about the song, and the artist's place in the world of urban rap:

“American Terrorist” is a song from the highly underrated emcee Lupe Fiasco. It was released in 2006, but it's message spans far beyond that date. It is true that history repeats itself and therefore even though many of the lyrics touch on our war in Iraq, it still incorporates everlasting themes such as racism. Lupe brings to the

table the fact that religion was once used to seek enlightenment, but now it is used as a reason for war. The main message of the song is how capitalist America profits from other peoples pain and misery. This is hands down one of my favorite songs, I could go through every single line and write how it relates to the world, but i won't because that'll take a lot of time and it would take away the intensity of the lyrics. Instead i will only analyze this line for now: "The ink of a scholar is worth a thousand times more than the blood of a martyr;" such a great line. A person could have a lot of power to persuade through words instead of violence.

This student overtly resists close reading, arguing that "it would take away the intensity" of the message. To his mind, analysis amounts to a destructive parsing of the lyrics that drains the song of its impact, a fairly common bias against close reading that most teachers have heard. When he does briefly attend to one line, he does little more than restate it in his own words. Rather than look closely at the lyrics, he chooses to take a broad perspective on the song, born, I believe, of his relationship to music and information gathering. For our students, contemporary music lives in the interconnected, fast-paced world of the internet, where videos can be watched, musicians' lives and viewpoints studied on personal web pages, and songs played and downloaded. Accordingly, this student's reflection on his song begins with quick references to politics, war, and corporate greed; racism and religion; the song's overarching message; and his personal opinion of the song. He writes about what he knows or has already considered based on his exposure to the world, the artist, and his music. Most students approached their songs in this way, emphasizing the larger social influences on and impact of their songs and their personal connections to them. The blog thus provided a means for bringing in all the multiple streams of information that informed students' understanding of and interest in the music. The sustained close reading of the song's lyrics would come in the later stage of drafting and revising, after everyone received feedback from peers that began to reveal which parts of the song might be unclear or interpreted differently.

Because young people have honed their skills at hyper attention through years of internet surfing, writing, and gaming, they have learned to shuttle between ever-changing contexts. Suresh Canagarajah uses the phrase "shuttling between languages" to describe multilingual writers who draw from different experiences and resources when they read, write, and speak. He urges teachers to be aware of and responsive to this shuttling tendency

in order to empower student writers. He explains: “Texts are not simply context-bound or context-sensitive. They are context-transforming. It is for this reason that students should not treat rules and conventions as given or pre-defined for specific texts and contexts. They should think of texts and discourses as changing and changeable. Students can engage critically in the act of changing rules and conventions to suit their interests, values, and identities” (603). Canagarajah insists that multilingual writers be allowed to bring their known experiences with language to their writing for school. Further, they should see rules as flexible; depending on the context, a broken rule may not equal an error. Similarly, with Web 2.0, students have developed new fluencies and unique perspectives on how to handle different discourses and their rules. Even those who are not multilingual are nonetheless multi-voiced by virtue of their experiences in online writing environments. They have developed an affinity for code switching and discourse combining that teachers should not only embrace but encourage. When students can bring their known modes of expression into the realm of the unknown, it eases some of the dissonance they may feel when faced with the new challenges of college writing. They may even find surprising ways to make academic writing conform to their own experiences. And even if the learning process is more about them conforming to academic literacy than the other way around, students who shuttle between modes of expression learn to make powerful choices and appreciate how those choices define an authorial voice, frame their audience, function differently in different contexts, and create shifting meanings and effects. We must allow students to take risks, stumble into error, and move toward a democratic ideal for learning to write that helps students appreciate how different spaces for authorship function in multiple forums both in and beyond the classroom.

**The Democracy of Error:  
Teaching and Learning in the Age of Web 2.0**

For most of our students’ lives, the internet has supported both their freedom to write in formats that authentically interest them and their ability to control public access to their ideas, but few undergraduates have seriously pondered the significance of this freedom and control. Peter Elbow asserts: “What a huge change the internet has brought to the experience of writing: so many more writers; so much more writing in the world; so much writing for *strangers!*” (171, italics in the original). All this writing in the world circulates on many scales, reaching local, targeted, or special interest audi-

ences all the way up to an international readership; it creates unprecedented opportunities for personal expression, ranging from informational, how-to posts to expression of opinion and protest. How are we in higher education helping students think about the power this opportunity affords? What are we doing to keep up with all these platforms for expression and exchange? What *should* we be doing?

In her 2004 chair's address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kathleen Blake Yancey wondered if we are keeping up at all or if our methods for teaching writing had "become anachronistic" (302) because of the extent to which technology had altered the terms of literacy. She speculated further by calling into question the fate of traditional English departments: would they, or had they already become, obsolete? Those who lament the bleak future of the humanities generally lay blame on the increasing corporate quality of higher education, along with the professional or vocational interests of students. Yancey, however, ascribes our questionable future to a slightly different cause: our resistance to innovation in literacy practice. According to Yancey, we in English commit a potentially fatal error in failing to keep up with the new writing public that has evolved in tandem with technology: "Never before has the proliferation of writings outside the academy so counterpointed the composition inside. Never before have the technologies of writing contributed so quickly to the creation of new genres. The consequence of these two factors is the creation of a writing public" (298). One crucial way to tap into this new writing public and "all the writing in the world" is to evolve pedagogical innovations for connecting what students know with the distinctive ways of knowing that we value in the academy. They will not only transition to academic literacies more easily but also make better sense of Web 2.0's potential if they experience it in academic spaces that make use of and newly contextualize their familiar spaces for reading and writing. And students and teachers alike will benefit from remaining open to reconsiderations of what constitutes academic writing.

In a recent *College English* Symposium, "What Should College English Be?" Jeff Rice proposes that we respond to the changes in reading and writing practice by actively refocusing our conception of college English around "Networks and New Media" (127). His compelling explanation of how networking refigures our relationship to text both highlights an urgent need for change and lends insight to why English departments may well *resist* it:

In [the] process of making networks, writers, through their work, see

themselves connected to information in ways *the space on the page* does not allow. The space on the page keeps bodies of information (and, thus, bodies) separate. In contrast, networks alter current understandings regarding how learning functions in social spaces. By social, I do not mean “people,” or “friendliness,” or “mingling.” Instead, I mean the ways bodies of information *socialize*, the ways they interact, or . . . associate. (130-31, italics in the original)

To put students into networks for writing requires relinquishing some familiar notions about what it means to generate and receive text. Writing in networks like Web 2.0 becomes less an individual, isolated act of composition—one that can be read and assessed in traditional ways—and more a connected and communally experienced act. The changes redefine the spaces where writing and literacy education occur and force us to wrestle with some of our most deeply held assumptions about writing and teaching. We in English studies are, by and large, deeply committed to “the space on the page.” We are familiar with it. We relish it, slow down and unpack it, assign it to be read and composed, and evaluate it. We appreciate and celebrate its beauty even as we judge its ideological meanings and impact. Our particular brand of appreciation and valuation, however, has a troubling effect. It can lead to teaching that, as Trimbur argues, “foreshortens the delivery system, the circuits of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption through which writing circulates as it takes on cultural value and worldly force” (194). Now more than ever, with Web 2.0 shifting the ground beneath our students’ feet (and if we let it, our own feet), we should guard against the danger of foreshortening the systems and circuits through which people make meaning. Due to the rapid nature of technological advances, students are becoming active writers well before they sit in our classes and tackle our assignments. We have to interrogate the effect their Web 2.0 writing practice has on them: their thinking, style, and approaches to college writing. In this time of profound change, it may be especially necessary to open ourselves up to seeing reading and writing beyond the space of the page, through eyes trained on the spaces in between, and as acts of circulation that emphasize both expression and reception, composer and audience, hits and misses.

Perhaps most importantly, in continuing to move beyond a focus on final products held to a limited standard of error, we will come closer to achieving the democratic vision for higher education that Shaughnessy advocated more than thirty years ago—a vision that has not lost its currency. At

the end of *Errors and Expectations*, she predicts that if we manage to “reconcile the entitlements and capacities of [the] new [open admissions] students with our traditional ways of doing things . . . we will be improving the quality of college education for all students and moving deeper into the realizations of a democracy” (293-94). Similar to Shaughnessy’s generation of teachers, we face a new kind of student in our classrooms. Quite unlike their predecessors, undergraduates today have been fundamentally shaped by technology and its means of expression. Their related entitlements and capacities now need to be reconciled to our traditional ways of doing things.

Though it might be her best-known and most significant work, *Errors and Expectations* is not the only place where Shaughnessy advocates for a more democratic academy that approaches students’ ways of thinking and writing with curiosity and respect instead of dismissal and condemnation. In “Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” she lambastes the academy that either flat-out dismisses or attempts to “convert” the most inexperienced writers. She wonders at teachers who fail to see that “competing logics and values and habits . . . may be influencing . . . students” (236). Such teachers, Shaughnessy claims, harmfully decontextualize the act of writing and/or default to grammar instruction, assuming less experienced writers have nothing to say or can not handle higher order tasks of writing: “Sensing no need to relate what he is teaching to what his students know, to stop to explore the contexts within which the conventions of academic discourse have developed, and to view these conventions in patterns large enough to encompass what students do know about language already, the teacher becomes a mechanic of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay” (236). For Shaughnessy, choosing to understand students and how to teach them better “demands professional courage” (238) because it forces teachers to both admit what students fail to learn and commit to improving their own knowledge and capabilities as teachers. She argues, however, that such a choice is “not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy” (239). To achieve this democratic vision certainly involves transcending a focus on error and correction, taking into account both “what students know” and “the contexts within which the conventions of academic discourse have developed,” and putting greater emphasis on processes and delivery systems and less on results and delivered products. Such moves would facilitate students entering into the conversation on their own terms, through which they can muster their own brand of courage to articulate arguments that have personal resonance for them.

It can be scary to write and even scarier for students to confront and

even embrace their limits and errors, but having an education means developing an informed voice, which is accomplished through trial and error, risk and reward. We have to encourage students to be bold. In *Writing at the End of the World*, his study of the value of the humanities and literacy education in the twenty-first century, Richard Miller examines the increasingly high stakes of the conversations in our contemporary world and proposes ways to help students gain a voice in them. He poses the question: “Can secular institutions of higher education be taught to use writing to foster a kind of critical optimism that is able to transform idle feelings of hope into viable plans for sustainable action?” (27). We need to help students engage with problems in such a way that they can find meaningful ways to articulate solutions. For Miller, the transformation of hope into action requires combining “the personal and the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institution” (31). Bringing blogs from personal into academic settings exposes the internet’s full potential and helps students imagine how they might use the arenas they regularly access on their own in different, more critical ways. They thereby can appreciate more fully the internet’s potential to authorize them as informed participants in fundamental social debates. Blogs help us, in Miller’s words, “[learn] how to hear what [our] students are saying” so we can teach them to “write in ways that [we] can hear” (48) in the academy.

Without hearing one another in this fundamental way, we cannot possibly reconcile our students’ needs and entitlements to our traditional ways of doing things and develop practices that meaningfully respond to contemporary concerns. Evolutions in writing demand evolutions in pedagogy, and the new, alternative writing spaces like blogs encourage us to evolve. For students, blogs provide a forum for collective discussions about and practice with writing through uncertainty. They facilitate interactive reading and responding to alternative ideas. And for teachers, blogs expose the varied and often unanticipated rhetorical moves that students make, shaping the contexts for literacy instruction today. They push us beyond overly simple notions of composition, error, and correctness to more sophisticated, current ideas about how writers think, interact, make meaning, and enter into the important discourses of the day.

### **Acknowledgment**

I wish to acknowledge the hard work and creative, courageous writing of my Fall 2007 English 2100 students: Kapil Dave Balkaran, Susan Chey, Anthony Ciaccio, Eric Favaloro, Paul Gianatiempo, Colvin Goddard, Manuel

Guerrero, Jr., Mairaj Haider, Tedesha Henry, David Iulo, Yasemin Kizil, Anton Leynov, Jericho Manalo, Dan Patsis, Richard Swanson, Andrew Torres, Shaif Uddin, and Linda Yao. Interested readers can visit the class blog at <http://cherylsmith.blsci.org/>.

## Notes

1. Not surprisingly, users do not unilaterally attribute all these positive qualities to blogs. Steven D. Krause, for instance, used blogs in a graduate class, “Cyberspace Rhetoric and Culture,” and found that for his purposes, “Blogs don’t do a good job of supporting interactive discussion” (B34). He prefers email lists, which allow replies to go automatically to all participants, and online bulletin boards included in course management sites like WebCT and Blackboard, which “thread” discussions based on individual posts. Depending on how the tool is used—how, for instance, a blog is regulated and integrated into the course—instructors define its usefulness differently.
2. The Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute at Baruch College employs a graduate writing fellow dedicated to supporting faculty members who want to incorporate blogging into their classes. I am indebted to writing fellow Luke Waltzer and the Institute for their support.
3. I quote from students’ work with their permission; excerpts are quoted directly from the blog with no modifications.

## Works Cited

- Bloch, Joel. “Abdullah’s Blogging: A Generation 1.5 Student Enters the Blogosphere.” *Language Learning and Technology* 11.2 (June 2007): 128-41.
- Bloch, Joel, and Cathryn Crosby. “Creating a Space for Virtual Democracy.”



- Essential Teacher* 3.3 (2006): 38-41.
- Canagarajah, Suresh. "Toward a Writing Pedagogy of Shuttling between Languages: Learning from Multilingual Writers." *College English* 68.1 (2006): 689-704.
- Elbow, Peter. "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries." *College English* 70.2 (2007): 168-88.
- Ferdig, Richard E., and Kaye D. Trammell. "Content Delivery in the 'Blogosphere'." *T.H.E. Journal* 31.7 (2004): 12-20.
- Gee, James Paul. "New People in New Worlds: Networks, the New Capitalism and Schools" *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. Ed. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantis. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 43-68.
- Graff, Gerald. *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Hyper and Deep Attention: the Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes." *Profession* 2007. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2007: 187-99.
- Kidder, Tracy. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Krause, Steven D. "Blogs as a Tool for Teaching." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Supplement: Information Technology (24 June 2005): B33-B35.
- Miller, Richard E. "The Fear Factor." *Academe* 93.6 (November-December 2007): 33-37.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Interchanges: On Asking Impertinent Questions." *College Composition and Communication* 57.1 (2005): 142-68.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Writing at the End of the World*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP, 2005.
- Nelson, Thomas, and Jan Fernheimer. "Welcome to the Blogosphere: Using Weblogs to Create Classroom Community." Computer Writing and Research Lab (CWRL), Department of Rhetoric and Writing, University of Texas at Austin. White Papers Series. PDF 0030822-1 (22 Aug. 2003): 15 pages.
- Rice, Jeff. "Networks and New Media." *College English* 69.2 (2006): 127-33.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 27.3 (1976): 234-39.
- Smith, Cheryl C. English 2100 Class Blog. <<http://cherylsmith.blsci>.

org/>.

Trimbur, John. "Composition and the Circulation of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 52.2 (2000): 188-219.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." *College Composition and Communication* 56.2 (2004): 297-328.