Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
Computers and Composition 27 (2010) 27–35
Computers and Composition
www.elsevier.com/locate/compcom

The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a 21st-Century Pedagogy

J. Elizabeth Clark

LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York, English 31-10 Thomson Ave., The Department of English E-103, Long Island City, NY11101, United States

Abstract

In our nascent digital culture, the traditional essayistic literacy that still dominates composition classes is outmoded and needs to be replaced by an intentional pedagogy of digital rhetoric which emphasizes the civic importance of education, the cultural and social imperative of "the now," and the "cultural software" that engages students in the interactivity, collaboration, ownership, authority, and malleability of texts. My readings of Yancey, Balkin, Vaidhyanathan, Lanham, and Gee have enabled me to reconfigure my composition classroom as an emerging space for digital rhetoric. Through the calculated and sequenced introduction of ePortfolios, digital stories, on line games, Second Life, and blogs, all of which create a new digital infrastructure for my course and assignments, I am working to create a set of practices that work together to explore the ways in which writing instruction can change to meet a new digital imperative; as such, I attempt to use technology in my courses to re-create the contemporary worlds of writing that our students encounter everyday.

Keywords: ePortfolio; Digital Rhetoric; Multimodal Composition; Curricular Redesign; Web 2.0; Cultural Software; Habits of Thought

In March of 2009, Kathleen Blake Yancey's NCTE publication "Writing in the 21st Century" came as little surprise to *Computers and Composition* readers, who for years have been at the cutting edge of implementing new technologies in the classroom, but it issued a significant challenge to the status quo in the larger composition community where new technologies and the teaching of writing have yet to merge. "Writing in the 21st Century" is "a call to action, a call to research and articulate new composition, a call to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of the future" (p. 1). This publication marks a distinctly new era of computers and composition—a challenge to articulate how technology is radically transforming our understanding of authors and authority and to create powerful new practices to converge with this new digital world. Myopic, Luddite fantasies of returning to pencil and paper, the disavowal of the role of technology in the classroom, and the supposition that technology is a passing fad are tired arguments now giving way to a new era of digital rhetoric where, more than ever before, people are becoming authors every day, constructing digital profiles, public commentary, and using publicly available resources to research and inform their opinions.

In *The Anarchist in the Library*, Siva Vaidhyanathan (2004) asked, "Does a technology's ideology determine, or at least influence, a culture?" (p. 19). According to Vaidhyanathan, yes: almost every facet of our personal and professional lives has shifted to new uses of communicative technology. With the pervasiveness of Web 2.0 comes a shift in our cultural norms. Jack M. Balkin (1998) detailed the way in which new information changes the ideology

E-mail address: lclark@lagcc.cuny.edu.

8755-4615/$ – see front matter © 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.compcom.2009.12.004

of a culture as "cultural software." Vaidhyanathan explained, "I'm fascinated by how widespread use of distributive communicative technology generates, to employ John Dewey's psychological tenet, 'habits of thought.' These 'habits' among individuals build into 'cultural habits,' or ideologies, through discussion, deliberation, and distribution." (p. 20). Vaidhyanathan's claim that new uses of digital media are "habits of thought" points to the now-ubiquitous, everyday use of technology and the ways in which digital rhetoric forms an integral part of that communication. As integral as digital rhetoric has become to society at large, for the first time, many of the ideas of the academy are far behind social and cultural innovation, not leading them. Academia has been slow to adopt the teaching of these new habits of thought to our students, and thus to address Yancey's call. The future of writing—based on a global, collaborative text, where all writing has the potential to become public—informs our classrooms and forms a new, "digital" imperative, one that asks how we can reshape our pedagogy with new uses of the technologies that are changing our personal and professional lives.

We cannot understand or embrace this digital imperative without the notion of flux: the ever-changing landscape of Web 2.0 platforms and applications. In this regard, the "greatest hits" of the current digital world—ePortfolios, blogs, wikis, Twitter, social networking software, Second Life—are not the final development in composition pedagogy. As the Fall 2008 issue of *Computers and Composition Online* makes clear in its examination of applications of James Gee's theory of play and gaming, there will always be new technologies; increasingly, virtual gaming worlds or social networking environments are challenging our notions of the boundaries of the classroom and our pedagogical assumptions about learning (Colby & Colby, 2008). Rather, the digital imperative is about transforming the classroom, moving away from the use of technology as convenient serendipity—such as the prosaic usage of PowerPoint and the occasional podcast or invocation of YouTube to add spice to a lecture—and moving toward a carefully employed pedagogy aimed at furthering students' digital literacy, just as earlier, process-based composition emerged as a dominant pedagogical model.

In our nascent digital culture, the traditional essayistic literacy that still dominates composition classes is outmoded and needs to be replaced by an intentional pedagogy of digital rhetoric that emphasizes the civic importance of education, the cultural and social imperative of "the now," and the "cultural software" that engages students in the interactivity, collaboration, ownership, authority, and malleability of texts. Today, the composition classroom should immerse students in analyzing digital media, in exploring the world beyond the classroom, in crafting digital personae, and in creating new and emerging definitions of civic literacy.

1. Gutting the Gutenberg pantheon: Changing "habits of thought"

In 1450, few could predict the global ramifications that the Gutenberg press would trigger. In a short 50 years, the world moved from reproducing books one at a time by hand, or by block printing, to printing hundreds of copies of books each year. The technology of the time gave rise to some of the most powerful intellectual movements in human history, including the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Protestant Reformation. What Gutenberg offered the world, however, was not so much a method of printing, but a method of rapid knowledge distribution and portability, what his contemporaries called "the art of multiplying books" ("Spread of Printing," n.d., p. 1). However, with the mechanized reproduction of text, the ability to alter a manuscript with marginalia, or to comment on previous marginalia, disappeared. Gutenberg's invention interrupted the rich tradition of interaction with a text.

Today, 21st-century culture is in the middle of another shift as the world becomes increasingly wired. Although the portability of knowledge is still important, what the digital age has added to Gutenberg's knowledge distribution is a new ability to interact with the text and to comment on it in a way that is more akin to the age of the scriptorum than the era of the printing press. As Richard Lanham (1993) asserted early on in the digital age in his seminal *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts,* the computer is a rhetorical tool, and I would argue, a collaborative one. Lanham argues that circuitously we have again returned to the powerful yoking of image and word in writing. Today's digital revolution offers the opportunity to merge the creativity of the individual monk illuminating a manuscript with the power of digitally distributed knowledge. We are moving from a world where marginalia exists in a single book in the library to an age where marginalia is a property of shared community. Sometimes, that marginalia becomes as important as the original text itself.

2. Challenging the willful disconnect: Making the case for a 21st-century rhetoric

The current iteration of Web 2.0 technologies offers an excess of options for exploring new ways to encourage students to engage in authentic authorial control of their own writing and to challenge received ideologies about the

way the world worked in the past. Since the advent of Peter Elbow's ground-breaking work, composition faculty have struggled to introduce the idea of authorship and authority in the classroom, encouraging students to take ownership over their own writing.

Today, artifacts of student learning have the potential to become actual published products, or works-in-process that raise questions around the public/private split of contemporary writing. In this context, Vaidhyanathan (2004) posited, "Communicative technologies, like many other technologies, reinforce, amplify, revise, and extend their ideologies. By using them, you change your environment. By communicating with others through them, you alter your frames and assumptions about the world" (p. 21). The very notion of authorship and authority is changing as writing and publishing in new forms becomes possible for anyone who can access the Web. Implicit in Vaidhyanathan's worldview is the notion of cultural habits and the ways in which we are internalizing the "cultural software" of the 21st century.

Just as Janice Lauer, Gene Montague, Andrea Lunsford, and Janet Emig (1981) posited a structure for learning writing "derived from rhetorical theory of the last decade" (p. xv) in *Four Worlds of Writing*, we now find ourselves in a moment where we can begin to structure learning based on theories of technology and writing created over the last two decades. As the technology changes, so too does society and, necessarily, the classroom. My readings of Yancey, Balkin, Vaidhyanathan, Lanham, and Gee have enabled me to reconfigure my composition classroom as an emerging space for digital rhetoric. Through the calculated and sequenced introduction of ePortfolios, digital stories, on line games, Second Life, and blogs, all of which create a new digital infrastructure for my course and assignments, I am working to create a set of practices that work together to explore the ways in which writing instruction can change to meet the digital imperative; as such, I attempt to use technology in my courses to re-create the contemporary worlds of writing that our students encounter everyday.

3. ePortfolios: Crafting the digital persona

One of the earliest glimpses of the future of writing in academia has come to us in the form of digital portfolios, or ePortfolios, which exemplify many of the issues for both faculty and students in transitioning to academic digital culture. Modeled on the paper portfolio, and thus serving as an example of how technology can update an effective and widely used pedagogy, ePortfolios first serve as a symbol of the move from a culture of paper information storage to digital information storage. They are a chronological record of student progress—in a single course, or increasingly, across a student's tenure at a college or university—with artifacts of student work showcased for a reader. Students compose and receive feedback digitally, which is new. But, within the context of composition studies, students are attentive to questions of audience and the development of writing in ways that are similar to a paper portfolio's function in a writing course. ePortfolios serve as an ideal bridge between traditional, essayistic literacy pedagogies and emerging digital rhetoric pedagogies because they embody both the old and the new.

More importantly, however, ePortfolios connect to the shift in digital culture as students experiment with the malleability and interactivity of text as they revise and alter their writing over time. Students' evolving iterations of their public selves become sites for reflection and integration of educational experiences as students articulate how and why they have changed and how this is represented in their writing.

The earliest ePortfolios prefigured Web 2.0, but as they continue to evolve, they offer a platform for considering questions of digital identity and audience as students explore the public/private nature of writing, ownership of their own writing, and the importance of crafting an argument for a particular audience. Public artifacts shared with parents, professors, and employers are markedly different than informal peer-to-peer communications among students. Students tailor their digital identities for multiple audiences, learning how to introduce themselves to a virtual world. This sense of network-situated self allows students to see how they function within different communities. Students connect across courses, across a college, and across the world.

ePortfolios also provide a nexus for discussions of ownership of digital material. Students engage in traditional questions of citation and argument using other writers' material and at the same time have a venue for considering themselves as emerging authors. Their authority becomes a site for contested knowledge production as they question who owns what and how we determine that. Digital identity, their own and that of others, becomes a site for exploring an expanded notion of *ethos* as students create differing online identities to meet the demands of specific situations and come to understand how their reputations as authors help or hinder the arguments they wish to make. Within the course, as students explore their digital identities, so too does the class examine assumptions about how and why arguments

are created. Students use their portfolios to demonstrate an authority over their own lives and educational trajectories and to establish online identities built on the quality, content, and character of their own work.

Along with Barbara Cambridge and Darren Cambridge, Kathleen Blake Yancey has led this electronic portfolio revolution, providing a substantial body of research and literature about the use of ePortfolios in higher education. As educational uses of ePortfolios continue to expand, we see the emergence of ePortfolios that are used for institutional and programmatic review, like Portland State's Institutional Portfolio[1], and the increasing use of ePortfolios by State Departments of Education (such as Indiana) for certification. Here, however, I am focusing specifically on my own pedagogical approaches to the use of ePortfolios in a particular course to measure student progress over the course of a single term.

I use ePortfolios in classes as varied as Basic Writing, Composition I, Creative Writing, and two versions of a capstone course for liberal arts majors, one entitled "Cultural Studies of Medicine" and the other "Flawless Futures: Fixing the World Through Fiction." In each of my courses, the key to a successful portfolio is, of course, reflective practice and integrated learning. As I often teach in learning communities, I am also interested in the ways in which students can make connections between the course material in several different courses and between their academic and lived lives. Our ePortfolios are ideally situated to help students demonstrate the network-situated self across multiple contexts.

In Fall 2005, I had a student, "Ally," who came to the English 101 learning community class as a tentative writer at best, convinced that the college-level work of reading three novels and writing about them was beyond her. During the semester, her confidence built slowly, as did her work. Her initial diagnostic essay was not English 101-level work. Constrained by a rigid understanding of the five-paragraph essay, Ally was hamstrung by the form and unable to fully develop her essays. She attempted to make everything fit into five paragraphs and ended up with only the shell of what promised to be a much longer essay. She thought of writing as a performance for the teacher, but not as something that had a significant role in her own life.

Over the course of the semester, Ally benefited from a portfolio pedagogy that allowed her to revise her work and to understand it in a larger context. She also began to branch out from the assignments in class to other digital writing environments, such as an optional blog assignment. Ally linked her personal blog about the war in Iraq to an interview paper she did with Vietnam veterans. Ally began to see connections between her interests—she had volunteered at the local veteran's hospital in high school—and her academic studies. Moreover, she began to understand herself as a writer, addressing the political situation in the United States in a public blog. Significantly, at the end of the term, she was one of the students I selected to present at the college-wide ePortfolio Showcase. She shared her work with the entire college, showing what she had written and how her work had changed over the course of the semester.

For Ally, the in-class activities that helped her to build essays, projects, researched arguments, multimodal compositions, and reflections all asked her to track her progress as a writer and to develop her meta-cognition as an author. More importantly, however, the digital presentation of the ePortfolio allowed Ally to gain critical skills in composing online and addressing a public audience. She quickly learned how to build an online activist persona for herself, creating a connected body of work around the war in Iraq, linking her interest in veterans to a blog that asked critical questions about the Iraq war, and then writing a research paper based on interviews with veterans of several wars that allowed her to test her emerging anti-war theories and to consider questions of audience and argument. Without the ePortfolio and her blog, Ally's work in the course would have been a series of disconnected assignments written for a teacher-peer audience. With the publication of her work on the ePortfolio and the blog, her work immediately changed focus, as she now had the ability to share her work—with those who followed her blog, with those she interviewed for the paper, as well as for her classmates and teachers. In this way, Ally was fully engaged in the participatory nature of Web 2.0 rhetoric, beginning to rely on an audience and its response to her writing as a tool for improving the way she addressed her readers.

As a vehicle for sharing student writing, ePortfolios are a powerful tool for engagement in my courses. Not content with mere academic performance, students want to share their work with their families and friends. Further, they look forward to sharing their work with employers in the future; they actively seek authorship, gaining confidence and a particular authority over their own experiences as they craft their ePortfolios. With that work, however, comes a

[1] Portland State University was one of the earliest institutions to use a digital portfolio for its 2005 re-accreditation. You can view that portfolio here: <http://www.portfolio.pdx.edu/>.

powerful responsibility to facilitate questions of the public and private nature of publishing. Many students assume the right to publish whatever they like, from photographs to personal narratives to sustained critiques of courses and texts. And, though they certainly have that right, the writing classroom becomes a site for other lessons important to the participatory nature of Web 2.0. As a class, we wrestle with issues of public publishing and private writing, exploring what information audiences have access to, and how this can inform their reading of student-authored work.

The most dramatic example of crafting a digital persona may be one I forced a student to erase; as such, this example serves as a powerful lesson about the importance of audience and the nature of public and private writing. In a basic writing course, I asked students to write an autobiographical piece and to post it on their ePortfolio. One student chose to write—in excruciating detail—about how she came to the United States illegally. She documented the way she entered the country, who brought her here, the route they took, the name of the "coyote," the first names of her fellow travelers, the dates of their travel, and where she lives and works today. It was an outstanding, astounding essay; in fact, it was quite possibly the best essay I have ever read by a basic writing student. She earned an "A" for her work. And, quite wondrously, it was the first "A" she had ever received in her educational career. Can you imagine how proud she was? How much she wanted to share her essay with her fellow classmates? With her family? With even larger audiences?

Although the City University of New York (where I teach) welcomes undocumented students, sometimes immigrants can face deportation when they are unable to provide proper documentation to law enforcement officials. I asked her to remove the essay from her ePortfolio because I was concerned about the legal ramifications for her, should, however unlikely, someone find her essay and use it as a basis for her deportation. She refused. We had long and tearful sessions discussing the legal implications, but she wanted to make her story public. I first suggested that she change the essay to third person and change the names, but she was unsatisfied with what she perceived as a fictionalizing of her powerful story. I consulted with a lawyer, with administrators at my college, and we asked her again to change the essay or take it down. She continued to refuse. And so, I did the paradoxically best and worst thing of my entire career so far, by far the most teacher-centered action ever: I told her if she didn't remove the essay from her ePortfolio, she would fail the course. She removed the essay and I removed her ePortfolio from the system.

At the end of the semester, the student received an "A" in the course; although she was upset about having to remove the essay from her ePortfolio, she learned a significant lesson about the high stakes of writing. She also learned a detailed lesson about access and privacy that she might not have learned elsewhere, or that she might have learned too late, after she had shared private information in a public fashion.

This is a dramatic example and one I am glad to say has not repeated itself in my courses. However, students—and in fact most users of Web 2.0 technologies—have yet to fully understand the implications of living a publicly accessible life. Responsible digital literacy can only come from helping students to make conscientious choices about how to use technology conscientiously and critically. In an era where we see news stories about employers searching Facebook before hiring employees, and where the public and private overlap as never before, the composition classroom can be a powerful site for helping students negotiate this new dimension of public life, Web 2.0 technologies, and decisions about what to share and when.

Through their ePortfolios, my students gain the sense of writing for a larger audience, participating in a dialogic community of writers, and understanding the implications of public writing. These are critical skills for 21st-century rhetoric that help them emerge from the course as engaged citizens—thinking and writing about some of the most important issues of our time, working to create their arguments for an audience outside of the classroom, and using contemporary writing technologies to showcase their work. In this way, ePortfolios use the participatory nature of Web 2.0 technologies as a site for enhanced student engagement and improved digital literacy.

4. Digital stories: Visual rhetoric and political freedom

In her keynote address to the 2005 Computers and Writing Conference, Andrea A. Lunsford (2006) challenged the notion that our current classrooms and pedagogies adequately serve students as she documented the explosion of a new form of literacy, one that is characterized ". . .by visual and aural components to mirror the agility and shiftiness of language filtered through and transformed by digital technologies and to allow for, indeed demand, performance. To describe such literacies," she said, "we need more expansive definitions of writing along with a flexible critical vocabulary and catalogue of the writing and rhetorical situations" (p. 170). Lunsford demonstrated the importance of incorporating digital rhetoric into the classroom, as well as helping students to understand the shifting nature of writing

and rhetorical situations, something Kathleen Yancey (2004) also argued in her CCCC address, "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key."

Despite their familiarity with Web 2.0 through gaming and social networking, however, some students are resistant to technological literacy in the classroom. In "A Break in the Transaction," Ellen Evans and Jeanne Po (2007) argued that, because millennial students have not been exposed to digital texts as a part of their education, they are resistant to digital texts as part of the curriculum; in short, they do not know how to approach these texts critically or analytically in an academic context. Far from embracing digital rhetoric, many students reject it in favor of a more comfortable essayistic literacy. At the same time, however, a fair number of students spend an inordinate amount of time on line, accessing many different digital texts. Along with many others, I argue that these digital texts need to be included in our courses and that students need to learn how to author texts of this sort. Addressing the same issue, DigiRhet.org (2006) predicts a new kind of cultural schism, a new kind of digital "divide where students may download complex, multimodal documents but lack the training to understand how to construct similar documents. . .. The new, emergent digital divide we will negotiate as teachers will be between those with and without access to the education and means to make use of multimodal civic rhetorics" (p. 236). Thus, the current focus of multimodal composition is to help students build on traditional writing skills and translate them into skills in composing digital media.

In "Understanding Visual Rhetoric in Digital Writing Environments," Mary E. Hocks (2003) argues, "If we can teach students to critique the rhetorical and visual features of professional hypertexts—the audience, stance, presentations of ethos, transparency of the interface for readers, and the hybridity of forms and identities—we can also teach them to design their own technological artifacts that use these strategies but are more speculative or activist in nature" (p. 645). Following Hocks' recommendation, to address the growing divide and to help students to design their own technological artifacts, I challenged the students in my English 101 learning community course to create a digital "activist" project that discussed, with images and spoken text, an issue they were passionate about. I was interested in student work that fully explored the possibilities of multimodal composition. Digital stories have emerged as part of our "cultural software" as programs like Animoto, MovieMaker, and iMovie have made merging images and oral text relatively simple. The Center for Digital Storytelling (n.d.), an international non-profit group exploring storytelling and new media technologies, explains, "We have found that writing into the images, narrating the story, and bringing the images to life using the power of digital media design tools, creates a powerful medium for presenting a story" (p. 4). In my class, these short two- to three-minute projects ranged from a woman who was recently homeless discussing the state of homeless services in New York City, to a young woman whose brother is serving in the U.S. Army creating a project about stopping the war in Iraq, to a student who created a digital story about global warming inspired by our class reading of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

"Ray," a political refugee from China, created a story about his spiritual practice of Falun Gong and his work as an activist to raise awareness in the United States. When we discuss the digital imperative and the possibilities inherent in digital media today, imagine the political and communicative power Ray had in telling his story. He moved from China, where Internet usage is highly censored, to the United States, which has more liberal access. He moved from a country where he was politically persecuted to a country where he could practice his religion openly. He moved from a culture of censorship to one in which his story could be told publicly. More than that, his story could be filmed and recorded for wide distribution.

Ray's digital account provides a good example of both the power of new media to enable students to tell stories in a new way and its power to distribute students' messages and connect them to online communities. It would have made an interesting traditional essay, certainly. However, using images and speech, the story gained power because it relied on visual rhetoric—particularly graphic and gory images of Falun Gong prisoners detained in China—to make the argument. Without the images, Ray would have created a more sanitized, less persuasive version of the story, relying on words alone to make the argument. Instead, the digital account merged images with oral components as Ray told his story and interviewed other Falun Gong practitioners living in the United States. Moreover, through computer-mediated communication, students like Ray can choose to share their stories through YouTube, ePortfolio, and other peer-to-peer networks, reaching an audience much larger than their classmates and instructor. These participatory Web 2.0 technologies allow students to reach larger audiences with the important work they are doing in their first-year composition courses. When they tell their multimodal stories and share them on the Internet, their education has an immediate impact on their lives and their interests, allowing them to put their new skills—like research and multimodal composition—into play immediately for audiences that may include their family, their friends, and even wider publics.

5. Living a second life with *Jennifer Government* and *Nation States*: Making text interactive

Although students may be immersed in the culture of Web 2.0, they are not immersed in a way that fully engages the complexities of our new techno-order. The challenge for teachers is to build on our extensive experience in composition studies with collaborative learning and writing and to yoke that to digital learning. How do we use digital technology to build community that reaches out to increasingly larger audiences, past the point of balkanized communities that think alike? How do we help students learn to critically engage digital information?

James Gee (2003) has written extensively on how game play should be an essential part of any curriculum. However, in composition classrooms at the college level, gaming is often limited to the use of online grammar sites like ChompChomp.com or Capital Community College's "Guide to Grammar and Writing." But more imaginative uses of on line games, in a Web 2.0 context, are beginning to yield demonstrable results in the composition classroom.

In a basic writing course, I use the novel *Jennifer Government* by Max Barry, a satirical look at the future of a globalized, corporate world. In addition to the novel, Barry has also created a free online game component called *Nation States* that complements the novel; the novel and the game are not identical narratives. Instead, the game asks students to address—in sometimes realistic and other times satirical terms—some of the issues raised in the novel around governance and nation-building. I am interested in the ways that the game extends the novel and makes it interactive. In *Jennifer Government*, national governments have become increasingly ineffectual, and corporations run the world. The plot follows a lone American agent, the eponymous Jennifer Government, in her search to find evidence to convict the Nike Corporation of murdering people to create a sensational buzz for their new sneakers. Students love the book and are able to write interesting essays about the relationship between their lives and material consumption. In the game, each day, they are e-mailed a series of questions or issues facing their governments. After they resolve the issues in question, their countries are ranked by the U.N. for the choices they make. Though the game itself does not have a direct connection to success in the writing course, the web-based writing I ask students to do about the game and their choices does.

The *Nation States* game makes a traditional text interactive as students become involved in making choices about the nations they create and comparing those choices—through writing assignments I devise—to the events that unfold in the book. Because they are engaged in the game, they are receptive to reading the novel and to writing assignments about the novel and the game. I create writing assignments for students' ePortfolios and their blogs that ask them to evaluate their choices as leaders of nations and to think about the social, ethical, and moral choices they make in governing their nation. I then ask them to compare their choices to the choices that have led to the dissolution of democratic rule in the book. Here, I am particularly interested in using game pedagogy to better engage students in the course, as they make active, creative choices and then write about their decisions.

Though it is arguably not a game, the most dominant current example of an online interactive social network is Second Life (n.d.), the virtual world created by Linden Labs. In my Composition I class, I am using Second Life as an environment for the equivalent of digital field trips for my students, and I base writing assignments around these field trips. As a class, we take field trips from our college's computer lab to different sites in Second Life that intersect with writing assignments. For example, in a class in which we were reading and writing about utopias, we considered whether Second Life could be considered a digital utopia. A student in the class, "José" writes, "Second Life, so far from what I've seen, is a Utopia in the sense that people are free to support various beliefs and create islands that suit their endeavors." José and his classmates were interested in the participatory element of Second Life and the possibilities for collaboration across time and geographical location.

In a course where the writings centered on activism, we visited Commonwealth Island to see the different activist displays there and to consider whether digital activism was a significant way to influence culture. Where the traditional classroom asks students to engage with a professor, their peers, and texts, Second Life by its very nature encourages students to interact with every aspect of the environment, such as interactive text and displays of information. Students also travel together in groups, experience the information together, discuss it, and analyze it. Further, they continue to experiment with digital self-representations, as "Sara" comments: "I have learned to go places such as Justice Commons and also places where I can receive free cloths [sic] . . .I am rather interested and excited about this whole event of Second Life. Possibilities are quite endless here, this goes especially for the matter of flying and also having wings. I'm very ecstatic about having wings."

Because students travel as a group, they develop a clear, collective identity in Second Life. They also become immersed in alternative digital identities, experimenting with notions of authority as they change their names (required in Second Life), their appearances, and sometimes, their affect. I do not have students write in Second Life, but rather

have them write reflectively about Second Life and their experiences there. These newer assignments give me a way to help students think critically about digital environments.

6. Blogs: Quick and dirty argument in action

In my classes, I am challenging traditional notions of essayistic literacy by pushing students to make their writing public and to use digital media. In these classes, students either keep personal blogs, focused on issues related to our class theme, or they contribute to a class blog. Our blogs are connected to the blogs of students in other courses at our college, as I share my blog assignment with another instructor and we ask students to read and cross-post on blogs across courses. Students are encouraged (and sometimes required) to comment on blogs from students in our class and in other classes.

We study and discuss the format of blogs as a means of creating arguments in online writing. Students learn how to link to external support for their arguments; they learn how public argumentation is being recast in an online arena. They also learn how to analyze online sites to decide whether or not they want to link to a particular site or to cite that information as authoritative, and thus gain facility in differentiating between reliable and unreliable sources. I also ask students to find articles in *The New York Times* that relate to our course study and to provide critical commentary on the articles in the course blog. Through these activities, students are immersed in the immediacy of writing, their power as authors, and their ability to comment publicly in the sphere of intellectual exchange.

As many students take on pseudonyms, this assignment helps us extend our discussions about crafting a digital identity. Students maintain an on line digital identity and embody the authoritative and authorial claims that come with that identity. They assume authority on the subjects they research and write about, and they develop a sophisticated sense of how their rhetorical moves influence their audience. Because of the comment function and the ability to dialogue online with audiences they both know and do not know, students feel pressured to create effective arguments and to respond to critiques of those arguments. Their work gets stronger because these visible critiques ask them to take ownership over their argument, and more often, their research.

Although blogs function as a kind of journal in my class, and I grade them as freewrites, I find that the faster, more immediate, and often shorter style that blog writing requires renders these blogs a very effective way to make concrete some of the skills students will need in high-stakes writing situations like essay exams, because they are asked to think and write quickly on issues of immediate interest. In my courses, we compose blog entries in class in one draft, so blogs have a different effect than essays composed outside of the classroom without the pressure of timed writing. The instant publishing feature of blogs, however, makes blogs one of the highest stakes (although graded as low stakes) forms of writing that my students do; in a single click, they become authors with the responsibility for what they have written. They are also aware of the possibilities for revising if someone in the class challenges the reliability of something they have written. In this way, blogs may be seen as a popular form of Balkin's "cultural software" that give meaning to the act of writing and help students to develop new habits of thought about writing and its role in their lives.

7. Conclusions: Embracing flux and moving towards a new pedagogy

To ignore the imperative of the now is to create a dangerous paradigm for the future. In his recent book *The Public Domain: Enclosing the Commons of the Mind,* James Boyle (2008) addresses this imperative by following current battles over the public domain. While there are many facets of a digital life, for Boyle, understanding the public domain is one of the most important, particularly as our students participate in generating new public content in their uses of Web 2.0. Boyle argues: "Precisely because we are in the information age, we need a movement—akin to the environmental movement—to preserve the public domain. . .. The explosion of information technologies has precipitated an intellectual land grab; it must also teach us about both the existence and the value of the public domain" (p. xv). And yet, the public domain is just one facet of the new critical democracy in which our students will be asked to live and work. Years from now, do we want a society that suffers from a lack of forethought about the digital age, just as we now suffer from years of ignorance about the environment? Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1986) focus our attention on the potential for schools to address problems of this sort: "Schools can be public places where students learn the knowledge and skills necessary to live in a critical democracy" (p. 224). Whether the issue is public domain or privacy or creative commons, it is clear that the cultural and social contexts for the classroom have already changed.

Of course, we need to work on this challenge at many levels: on the individual level in our courses, at the departmental and programmatic level, and across campuses. In "Writing in the 21st Century," Kathleen Yancey's (2009) ambitious agenda for the future includes the following tasks: "Articulate the new models of composing developing right in front of our eyes; Design a new model of a writing curriculum K-graduate school; Create new models for teaching" (pp. 7-8). In an emerging Web 2.0 culture that privileges community and collaboration, we need to work together to encourage our writing programs to develop extensive curricular reviews that address digital literacy in the 21st century. We need to work to help the profession embrace digital rhetoric not as a fad, but as a profound shift in what we mean by writing, by literacy, and by cultural communication. And what then? We need to be ready to morph—from a book culture, to an online culture, to whatever comes next—so that our students are ready to meet the challenges that lie ahead, in whatever form they appear.

J. Elizabeth Clark, Professor of English and Co-Director of Composition at LaGuardia Community College, has been active with ePortfolios locally and nationally since 2001. She serves on the Executive Board of the Conference on Basic Writing, is part of the *Radical Teacher* editorial collective, and is AAC&U's local campus Project VALUE Coordinator. Her publications have appeared in *Radical Teacher, Peer Review, Minnesota Review, Journal of Basic Writing, Journal of Medical Humanities, Women's Studies Quarterly*, and others.

References

Balkin, Jack M. (1998). *Cultural software: A theory of ideology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Boyle, James. (2008). *The public domain: Enclosing the commons of the mind (xv)*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Center for Digital Storytelling. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.storycenter.org

Colby, Richard, & Colby, Rebekah. (Eds.) (2008). Reading games: Composition, literacy, and video gaming. *Computers and Composition Online*. Retrieved from http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/gaming_issue_2008/ed_welcome_gaming_2008.htm

DigiRhet.org. (2006). Teaching digital rhetoric: Community, critical engagement, and application. *Pedagogy: Critical approaches to teaching literature, language, composition, and culture*, *6*(2), 231–259. Retrieved from Project Muse.

Evans, Ellen, & Po, Jeanne. (2007). A break in the transaction: Examining students' responses to digital texts. *Computers and Composition*, *24*(1), 56–73.

Gee, James. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Giroux, Henry, & McLaren, Peter. (1986). Teacher education and the politics of engagement: The case for democratic schooling. *Harvard Educational Review*, *56*, 213–218.

Hocks, Mary E. (2003). Understanding visual rhetoric in digital writing environments. *College Composition and Communication*, *54*(4), 629–656.

Lanham, Richard A. (1993). *The electronic word: Democracy, technology, and the arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lauer, Janice, Montague, Gene, Lunsford, Andrea, & Emig, Janet. (1981). *Four worlds of writing*. New York: Harper and Row.

Lunsford, Andrea A. (2006). Writing, technologies, and the fifth canon. *Computers and Composition*, *23*(2), 169–177.

Second Life. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.secondlife.com

The spread of printing: The Gutenberg Bible at the Ransom Center (n.d.). Retrieved June 8, 2009, from http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/gutenberg

Vaidhyanathan, Siva. (2004). *The anarchist in the library: How the clash between freedom and control is hacking the real world and crashing the system*. New York: Basic Books.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. (2004). Made not only in words: Composition in a new key. *College Composition and Communication*, *56*(2), 297–328.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. (2009, February). *Writing in the 21st century.* Retrieved June 8, 2009, from http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Press/Yancey_final.pdf