

Roundtable 1

Collaborative Digital Spaces in the Composition Classroom

Kevin Risner

John Carroll University

Most teachers today are familiar with technologies such as Blackboard and have used them in their classrooms. These virtual learning platforms open up new avenues for collaboration among students, extending the classroom space and providing opportunities for discussion that mimic activities students are already performing in their non-academic, social lives. In this article, I discuss some ways that teachers might incorporate technology and multimodal composition practices into their classrooms. With these new spaces available for use, there needs to be greater responsibility on the part of both instructors and students to consider what content is best left out of classroom interaction and discussion and what can be included.

After exploring the evolution of digital media in a previous capstone project, I hope to look more closely at multiple avenues of online collaboration—where students are able to interact and respond to discussions made during class (and outside it). Not only is the evolution of digital media important, but the concept of digital space also plays a strong role in the composition classroom and how both students and teachers interact. There is a reciprocal relationship between the actual classroom space and the virtual realm. Kirkland postulates that digital environments have repositioned space “around more flexible boundaries” (12); he calls for educators to extend their own views about space from the physical and embrace a widespread

expanse where students and instructors interact online via Facebook, Twitter, and other environments that are not simply surrounded by walls (ibid.). Being able to occupy and move around in these digital spaces is critical to learning.

In the following paragraphs, I will explore three different locations used in some composition classrooms today: Blackboard (and other virtual learning platforms), blogs, and social media websites (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). These online spaces may instigate in-class or out-of-class discussion and facilitate student collaboration on projects and assignments that are assigned by the instructor.

The first platform I will explore is common across most universities. Blackboard and its permutations are spaces used by both instructors and students not outside the allotted class time. In my own experiences, I have found some attributes of this website helpful; it is a good storage space for course documents and assignments. I have brought up documents during class and I have also returned to Blackboard for the purpose of obtaining a document or upload when I am not at my home computer. Some students in the past have also voiced their appreciation of the Blackboard site for this purpose. They have said that it is handy to have all of the material in one place so that they might be able to access it whether they are on their own laptop or on a public university computer.

Another positive attribute of Blackboard other instructors have brought up is the discussion board feature. This is where additional out-of-class conversations may take place—about topics previously mentioned in class or upcoming assignments. In my capstone project in

2012, I talked with an instructor (Lynn¹) who had a very intriguing and encouraging experience with student collaboration on the Blackboard discussion board.

For Lynn, one of her major goals as an instructor over the years has been “to write in many different kinds of spaces within the classroom, using the Internet during class time, and writing in blogs in and out of class” (personal communication, February 21, 2012). She believed the evolution of digital media and the ever-present place of technology, no matter where one is, has made it impossible to reject the idea of digital space(s). During the spring semester in 2012, Lynn allowed the mingling of two online spaces; both of her advanced composition classes interacted with one another and discussed various topics in one online forum. There was communication *between* two classes, not just within one; students were able to write publicly to each other as well as through private messages. Additionally, students continued discussions that took place in their respective classes, bringing in thoughts and ideas that the other class might not have discussed. In the end, concepts for future response papers and research proposals were brought to light, and students managed to retain important insights that were gained from discussion outside of a lecture or seminar environment.

This circumstance may be an exception to the discussion board conversations I have experienced. It all depends on the subtle nuances and relationships of the classes and between the classes. Some students will be more excited to voice their opinions in this forum; others will not feel comfortable providing insight in this digital space, even in a situation like this where no one but the one or two classes can see the conversations. Though I have had some insightful comments and points brought up in Blackboard discussion boards, most of my own experience

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

has been where an instructor gives a writing prompt or asks a question to the class; in response, each student writes a small paragraph. No further response is made by others; no interplay of ideas or additional debate arises. My question as an instructor, then, is how do we, as writing instructors, foster engaged dialogue among students in virtual spaces? Many individuals may not be teaching two similar courses at the same time, so there is only dialogue among students in one class. Therefore, teachers need to consider more inventive methods of facilitating robust discussion. To promote this goal, I feel it is important for instructors to provide guidelines on how students should interact with one another when using discussion boards; what follows depends on the individual students' demeanors, what is most comfortable for them.

A similar website that I have had experience with is Epsilen. Though not as common as Blackboard, Epsilen is another online portal that welcomes student input through various means. Aspects of Facebook are noticeable on Epsilen, where students and instructors can create a profile of interests (scholarly and non-academic), incorporate a profile picture, submit blog posts, interact with one another through private messages, have in-class or between-class discussions on varying topics, and upload assignments and/or projects such as e-portfolios.

Overall, I consider Epsilen to be a valuable interface with many features for both instructors and students, not just in composition classes but also in their future careers. However, I would caution that the interface may be more difficult to learn and, therefore, demands additional training and support before instructors can use it effectively. Time within class may need to be used to help train students as well if outside assistance is not available.

Stemming from Blackboard and Epsilen, I now turn to a less exclusively academic form of online interaction: the blog. I noticed this particular area of digital spaces when I was a private

school teacher in Istanbul in 2009-2010. At the time, some of the classes at the school had their own websites and blogs where instructors would provide online activities to help students learn English. Students were to respond to blog posts made by the instructor; these responses would, in theory, allow students to practice English outside of class time and help them write full, grammatically correct sentences. Thus, in this situation, collaboration takes place mainly between instructor and student.

A more recent and close-to-home example of blog use in the classroom comes from my capstone project. I talked with another instructor (Lara) about what forms of digital media she used in her composition classes. Lara focused more on blogs instead of Blackboard, and she spearheaded a blog that was specific to one class. She would put writing prompts on the blog posts and, like the Istanbul school instructor, encourage students to respond to the prompts. In this case, Lara expected a much larger response by students—possibly even research. On certain Fridays, in lieu of class time, students were to spend the time researching a specific topic relevant to the class unit or discussions within that unit. Lara felt these particular sessions were helpful for students to become more independent researchers and more responsible academics (personal communication, February 15, 2012).

From my discussion with Lara and from what I witnessed on class websites in Istanbul, blogs are a great digital space for students to have more practice writing and thinking. Though the final reasons for having these blogs are different depending on the school, there is still the push to have students interact with instructors outside of the short class time. These examples allow us to consider the benefits of blog access. For example, students can read one another's writing before commenting. This may be a very beneficial exercise for second language writing;

however, to claim that this is a healthy and helpful area of online interaction and collaboration overall is yet to be seen. In other words, for composition classrooms in the U.S., concerns of plagiarism may outweigh these benefits.

The final digital space I wish to discuss is social media. I have heard much from instructors—both positive and negative—about the many avenues that social media make available for classroom interaction. For example, there are some composition classes that have used Facebook as a meeting point, similar to Blackboard, to discuss topics and to play off of one another's ideas in a space outside of the regular classroom. Special groups are created on the social networking site, and students are welcome to join these groups and take part in the discussion—hopefully leading to future projects and written assignments and responses.

Lara, one of the instructors I had interviewed, used Twitterature (dialogues of classic literature written as tweets) in her composition class and stated that students really enjoyed reading them. She incorporated the idea of genre in this particular lesson and showed how tweets have become such a pervasive element in many other platforms (i.e. news stories and articles pared down to 140 characters). Though I have yet to hear instructors creating a Twitter handle for composition classes, I have heard from some of my own students that they have had to use Twitter in other non-composition classrooms, either during class or outside it. This intriguing step into social media—perhaps just for the sake of using it—has become a debated area for instructors and pedagogical scholars alike.

Many instructors have posited where to draw the line when it comes to digital space. In other words, which elements of social media are appropriate in academic instruction? All three instructors I talked to for my capstone project agreed that there should be no infringement on

students' and instructors' privacy. This meant that Facebook—though an interesting and possibly fruitful space for both student and instructor to collaborate—would not be an appropriate space because it might provide information some would not feel comfortable showing. Loretta, the third instructor in my project, asserted that as instructors “we can certainly require students to do some self-reflection and personal essays... but we cannot force our way into their private spaces” (personal communication, March 31, 2012). Accordingly, there should be no contact between student and instructor via private messages or chats on Facebook. The more professional e-mail should be maintained as the de facto communicative tool for student and instructor.

Lara and Lynn both agreed that participation in public forums should not be a requirement in a composition classroom; they did not feel comfortable having their students participate in these spaces for class credit. They preferred to have some kind of instructional supervision over the interactions made between students. This was why Lynn created her own communities and still allowed communication between courses, though it was private, to only be viewable and comment-able by members of the class. Lara also agreed with this idea of privacy: the blogs she set up for her composition class were set so that only the students in her class could see her blog posts and fellow students' comments. There is the possibility of outsiders being able to finagle their way into these closed-door communities, but the likelihood is slim and most individuals, especially now in 2013, realize that user privacy in any online realm is not 100% verifiable.

To conclude, these three online collaborative spaces have only been briefly discussed and investigated here. Blackboard and Epsilen use can be measured and inspected for efficacy within and outside of the composition classroom. The same holds true for blog posts and social media

websites. The question to ask is: to what extent are these websites helping our students to become better writers? Because making better writers is our goal, then we might also consider the merits of other digital spaces beyond those discussed here. Additionally, we might think about the balance of digital and in-person interaction within a specific class.

Finally, we should also consider the way that technology can impact not only collaborative discussion practices but also individual processes of composition. The evolution of digital media has allowed student writing to grow from simple text-only documents to ones that are more complex and diverse. Both students and instructors have the option to place, for example, hyperlinks within their writing, comments, and assignments. They can also insert images and embed videos and sound clips to complement their texts. Fleckenstein believes that it is impossible to separate images and text in most communicative situations today, particularly in writing (4-5). Because writing has become multi-modal in this way, instructors need to consider how best to incorporate these elements into assignments and provide students with the resources they need to write at the university level today.

Works Cited

- Fleckenstein, Kristie S. "Inviting Imagery Into Our Classrooms." *Language and Image in the Reading-Writing Classroom: Teaching Vision*. Eds. Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Linda T. Calendrillo, and Demetrice A. Worley. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002. 3-26. Print.
- Kirkland, David E. "Researching and Teaching English in the Digital Dimension." *Research in the Teaching of English* 44.1 (2009): 8-22. Web. 29 November 2011.