Entering the Digital Commons: Using Affinity Spaces to Foster Authentic Digital Writing in Online and Traditional Writing Courses

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the field of rhetoric and composition has been closely allied to the digital humanities for many years, instructors in these disciplines often remain on their own in terms of adopting, implementing, and evaluating digital technologies. While theoretical scholarship in digital rhetoric is advancing, instructional practices lag behind. Surveying 72 doctoral-granting rhetoric and composition programs, researchers found innovation in the implementation of new media comes primarily from solitary instructors (Anderson and McKee, 74). This article presents several ways in which writing instructors can leverage digital spaces to improve their pedagogies. In particular, the article focuses on digital spaces that James Gee calls "affinity spaces". While Gee's notion of affinity spaces often refers to gaming, the concept may be expanded to include virtual spaces that learners visit voluntarily such as blogs, e-zines, social media sites, and digital backchannels. By leveraging such spaces, and implementing them using Michelene Chi and Ruth Wylie's ICAP *(Interactive, Constructive, Active, and Passive)* framework, writing instructors can construct powerful learning environments. These digital spaces are not only part and parcel of the digital humanities; they are prime territory for engaging students in rhetorical processes – whether analyzing rhetorical messages or generating rhetorical artifacts.

Keywords: digital humanities, digital rhetoric, affinity spaces, social media, digital literacy

INTRODUCTION

Today's students spend unprecedented amounts of time engaged in digital worlds, while researchers and educators have been increasingly recognizing the value that these digital spaces may hold for teaching and learning. For example, John Bransford, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking, authors of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School*, wrote that "emerging technologies are leading to the development of many new opportunities to guide and enhance learning that were unimagined even a few years ago" (3). While such scholarship is beginning to emerge, Jennifer Sheppard, author of "The Rhetorical Work of Multimedia Production Practices: It's More than Just Technical Skill," notes that there is "difficulty translating these ideas into classroom pedagogy and rhetorically purposeful production practices" (123). Pedagogical training for instructors in the area of technology integration is limited, whether technology is the subject of rhetorical analysis, such as examining digitized texts, or merely a tool used for word processing for composition.

In a survey of 72 doctoral-granting rhetoric and composition programs, Paul Anderson and Heidi McKee's study showed innovation in the implementation of new media does not come from the discipline, the institution, or the program, but it originates with the individual instructor. They found that 97% of instructors trained themselves on how to adopt and implement technology (Anderson et al. 74). Therefore, it's likely that these implementations may not be based on theoretical or empirical research, but rather on preference, convenience, and availability.

This article presents several ways in which writing instructors can leverage digital spaces to improve their teaching practices. In particular, it focuses on digital spaces that students often visit – these spaces are identified by James Gee as affinity spaces – and then the article illustrates application of Michelene Chi and Ruth Wylie's ICAP framework to support learning. This article asserts that affinity spaces can serve as subjects of rhetorical analysis as well as tools for participating in rhetorical processes. As such, they present powerful opportunities for learning when implemented successfully.

DIGITAL WRITING AND AFFINITY SPACES

At Michigan State University, the Writing Information and Digital Experience (WIDE) Research

Collective focuses on emerging technologies in the digital humanities. In a collective essay titled "Why Teach Digital Writing?" WIDE scholars argue that networked computers have fundamentally changed the writing process and the dynamic between writers and readers (1). WIDE recommends a pedagogy that is a) situated in contexts of rich affordances for writing, b) rooted in a rhetoric that is technological, social, and cultural, c) linked to thoughtful, critical consciousness of technology, d) framed by learning how to learn, and e) anchored by multimodal approaches to writing (5). Indeed, writing in digital environments is fundamentally based in multimodal approaches to writing, including producing multimedia, or non-alphabetical texts, such as audio, video, graphics, and HTML pages. In "Integrating Multimodality into Composition Curricula: Survey Methodology and Results from a CCCC Research Grant," the American Council on Education defines multimodal compositions as "compositions that take advantage of a range of rhetorical resources—words, still and moving images, sounds, music, animation—to create meaning" (60).

Today, digital spaces are a common part of students' lives. Many spend significant time accessing media, participating in social networks, and participating in mobile and immersive virtual worlds. In "Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces: From the Age of Mythology to Today's Schools," James Gee argues that when people electively go to digital environments for their pleasure, they are participating in affinity spaces (223-228). Gee asserts that "affinity spaces" are virtual places where communities of informed peers provide ongoing, informal learning through their burgeoning relationships, shared practices, and collective knowledge. By integrating affinity spaces such as Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Pinterest, and other sites that learners electively visit, the rhetoric course itself can merge multiple affinity spaces into one larger affinity space because, as Gee and Hayes points out in "Nurturing Affinity Spaces and Game-Based Learning," "the organization of the space (the site and what it links to, including real world spaces and events in some cases) is as important as the organization of the people" (7).

Affinity spaces also provide a sense of community that can extend and support the classroom community. Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt discuss the construction of online learning communities in *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*. Palloff and Pratt assert that communities can be formed when "a group of people share common practices, are interdependent, make decisions jointly, [and] identify themselves with something larger than the sum of their individual relationships" (27). Similarly, Tim Lindgren describes blogs as places akin to a local writing group: "a rhetorical place where writers can bring works-in-progress to a like-minded group of writers who will offer feedback and dialogue." The "whereness" and "whoness" of blogs might prove to be invaluable to online learners, who could connect to their peers in cyberspace writing communities.

In *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to "Be There" for Distance Learners*, Rosemary Lehman and Simone Conceicao write about cultivating presence in online teaching. "Social presence," they write, "means there is a willingness on the part of participants to engage in communication exchanges" (5). Lehman and Conceicao describe a model of presence that they call "Being There for the Online Learner." The model can be visualized like the layers of an onion: the exterior is the actual online interface and materials; the next layer is an environment within that is based on immersion, realism, suspension of disbelief, and involvement; the next layer provides an inviting social environment; and the core positively affects the thought, emotions, and behavior of the learner (22).

Affinity spaces help integrate online instructional spaces with digital spaces in which many learners are already deeply engaged. Learning is no longer isolated, contained, and separated, and digital social environments no longer become forbidden spaces, or spaces outside of learning; students become part of the online learning environment. While Gee's notion of affinity spaces is closely tied to his work on gaming, it may be expanded to apply to several types of virtual spaces that people visit voluntarily to share information and digital artifacts.

TYPES OF AFFINITY SPACES

There are many affinity spaces that involve digital writing – websites, blogs, e-zines, social media sites, podcasts, infovis, and digital backchannels, to name a few. Each of these provides rich opportunities to embed authentic digital writing into composition courses. These are spaces where students may go to analyze texts and media, construct and co-construct multimodal compositions, or participate in social and collaborative activities. While digital games are certainly affinity sites, they do not generally involve digital writing, and therefore will not be considered here.

Pedagogically, these affinity spaces for multimodality serve as genre instruction for students.

"Affinity spaces are organized to help people make better choices. They are organized to share information so that new and better choices can be discovered. They are organized, as well, to share information about choices that work and ways to learn how to make better and better choices. These choices are not just about designing things. They are also about how to socially interact in the affinity space, and outside it, as well, including in 'real life,' so that goals are accomplished and people grow, no matter what their age" (Gee and Hayes, 28). In the development of spaces, particularly websites, blogs, and e-zines, writers establishing learning that would not otherwise occur.

Websites

Prior to blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies, hypertext used to be a relatively static conveyance of information connected by hyperlinks. In *Writing Inventions: Identities, Technologies, Pedagogies*, Scott DeWitt asserts that hypertext should be a place where one goes as much to write as to read, thereby transforming research into a reciprocal process of inquiry, discovery, and meaning making; students often accessed hypertext, "as a way to support claims" (39). By encouraging students to construct websites or contribute to them, particularly in small groups, instructors can make these experiences highly interactive and mirror the constructivist nature of composition practices that focus on inquiry, discoveries, and connections.

Blogs

Blogs (short for weblogs) are user-generated opinion pieces that writers can post on a number of blogging platforms or on their own personal websites. Their popularity has grown immensely in recent years with blogs devoted to every topic imaginable. In "Abdullah's Blogging: A Generation 1.5 Student Enters the Blogosphere," Joel Bloch describes blogging as "a simple and low cost way of giving students access to publishing and distributing their writing on the Internet, as a method of providing them with the experience of writing in a digital format, and as a means of discussing issues related to their classroom work and their lives" (128). Blogs need not be lengthy or complicated. Microblogs, for example, are blogs that limit the number of characters that a contributor can include in a post. Sid Dobrin, University of Florida Research Foundation Professor, Department Chair of the English Department, and Professor of Digital Rhetoric, promotes teaching concision in technical writing through micro-blogging,

which he defines as short, character-limited blogs associated with social networking sites. Dobrin uses Twitter and requires his students to convey their message or question in only one post, using standard written English, and no abbreviations, to help them focus on concision.

E-Magazines

E-zines, also known as webzines, are digital magazines, with editorial calendars, curated archives, and subscription models. In his article, "Integrating Hypertextual Subjects: Combining Modern Academic Essay Writing with Postmodern Web Zines" Robert Samuels describes his students' e-zine, *The Daily Brewin*, observing that e-zines enable "collaboration, non-linearity, multiple perspectives, and a transformed sense of the author" ("Integrating"). Through public, digitally published writing, e-zines enable students to write for a genuine audience and purpose, making the writing experience more authentic, collaborative, and socially-situated.

Social Media and Social Networking

User-generated media, also known simply as social media, is media that is conceptualized, submitted, and viewed by anyone with access to a user-generated media site, such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. Alexandra Rice, author of "Students Push Their Facebook Use Further into Course Work," reports the rise of social media by college students and as a means of communicating about college coursework. She reports that ninety percent of college students use Facebook and a quarter of college students think it is valuable to their academic success ("Students"). According to Stephanie Vie, students spend a quarter of their day interacting with social media (10). This provides something that many forms of classroom-based multimodal writing do not offer, which includes an authentic, global, and responsive audience. Failing to integrate these types of technologies risks widening the digital divide that increasingly separates the academy and its students.

Gina Maranto and Matt Barton, in their article "Paradox and Promise: MySpace, Facebook, and the Sociopolitics of Social Networking in the Writing Classroom," urge educators to recognize that there is a cultural imperative to address social networking technologies in the composition classroom due to their sheer prevalence in American culture and society, with some students spending as much as eight hours a day on Facebook (38). Maranto and Barton discuss the benefits of social networking sites; these sites engage students in

certain levels of abstract thinking, collaboration, and peer review, skills that could translate well to the writing classroom (44). User generated social media sites include easy opportunities for students to distribute their work on the World Wide Web or to critically discuss notions of public versus private, the permanence of digital publication, and the authority of authorship. In many ways, they represent the online course, or "affinity space" of the future, where students are representing themselves in virtual space in authentic, original, and ever-changing ways that are visible to their peers and instructors.

Podcasts

Podcasts are audio recordings that tell stories, share conversations, or report news. They are often recorded in the first-person and produced in an informal, narrative style. Connie Snyder Mick believes that podcasts are often closely connected to a physical location. In "Podcasts and the Teaching of Writing: Recasting Student Voices in the Composition Classroom," Snyder groups podcasts into four categories: undefined, stationary, touring, and abstract. Only undefined podcasts do not take the author's or listeners' locations into account; stationary podcasts are about specific, tangible places; touring podcasts are about a series of specific places; and abstract podcasts are about conjuring up a sense of ambiance or environment (237). Similar to blogs and e-zines, place-based podcasts may transport learners and listeners to environments far afield from their own and help them understand the contexts from which their peers are writing.

Information Visualization

User-generated media also takes the form of data, charts, and graphs. With the proliferation of data and "big data," information visualization is becoming a career field unto itself. Madeline Sorapure calls information visualization "infovis" and her scholarship argues for encouraging students to produce as well as consume it. She writes, "Projects that ask students to visualize text, personal data, and social data can provide compelling entry points into Web 2.0 as students learn about existing tools and sources of data, produce their own visualizations, and then analyze the insight that they and others can gain through seeing data represented visually" (68). One of the easiest entry points to infovis is textual data visually represented within Wordle, which organizes text based on the frequency of the words occurring in it. Thus, it is a type of corpus with a visual design. By contextualizing the relative frequency of

words, Wordle allows viewers to conduct data analysis around the linguistic features of writing as well as contemplate how visual design enhances semiotics.

Digital Backchannel

The digital backchannel is, arguably, a combination of user-generated social media and other communication behaviors, such as texting, that create an undercurrent of communication on campus and in classes. In "Digital Underlife in the Networked Writing Classroom," Derek Mueller advances the term "digital underlife" to describe the "elusive, underground discursive activities proliferated with the aid of digital technologies" that produce "extraneous, hyper-threaded interchanges— between pairs of individuals or among crowds of users" (241). Mueller connects digital underlife to the concept of a backchannel, which he defines as "distal communication activity associated with a central event, often circulating beyond the apprehension of a focal speaker" (242). In this way, texting, chatting, and posting have become the new "note passing" and "whispering," slightly beyond the grasp of the instructor, but perhaps more pervasive, more distracting, and less detectable than either.

USING THE ICAP FRAMEWORK TO FOSTER LEARNING

There are infinite ways to implement these kinds of affinity spaces into composition and other courses, with scant research on effectiveness. In the absence of such research, it may be helpful to adopt Michelene Chi and Ruth Wylie's ICAP framework, an empirically validated hypothesis. The ICAP framework proposes that cognitive engagement can be categorized into one of four modes - Interactive, Constructive, Active, and Passive – and predicts that as students become more engaged (from passive to interactive) their learning will increase (219).

In writing courses, passive use of affinity spaces might simply be using them as a conveyance tool; for example, using Twitter to share assignments or articles. Active learning might include visiting an affinity space for the purposes of analysis and critique, such as an online video of an animated short film that students view before producing a review. Constructive learning might include using digital technologies to construct arguments or convey ideas, such as writing a blog post or producing a YouTube video, and interactive learning might include co-constructing a website with a peer group or collaborating on a podcast.

IMPLEMENTING AFFINITY SPACES IN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

While there are infinite creative ways in which instructors could incorporate affinity spaces into instructional practice, the ICAP framework provides the structure to ensure that these spaces are used for constructive or interactive learning experiences. This section examines how three different types of affinity spaces – blogs, e-zines, and social media – can be implemented effectively, and in what ways these spaces prompt constructive and interactive cognitive engagement. With so many affinity spaces being highly interactive, it's completely possible to aspire to interactivity, as the following examples illustrate.

Constructive and Interactive Blogs

Blogging is an increasingly easy activity for instructors to incorporate into their courses. In some cases, learning management systems provide blogging platforms for self-contained blogs; however, these often lack the authenticity of writing for a truly public audience. Rather, it may be useful to encourage students to either start their own blog using a professional blogging platform such as Medium©; to inquire about contributing a guest blog to an established blog on a topic of one's choice; or to release a blog on one of their own social media platforms, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. The very nature of determining where to blog, who to blog for, and what to blog about are deeply rhetorical. And the processes of reading similar blogs in order to find points of connection; constructing one's own blog post; and then responding to comments involve active, constructive, and interactive cognitive modes, respectively.

Guiding learners to select topics can be one of the trickiest parts of engaging them in authentic blogging. Lindgren encourages his students to write about the places that they inhabit – their countries, states, cities, and neighborhoods - and to respond to each other's posts, making their writing experience personally relevant, culturally informative, and highly interactive. Moreover, Lindgren has found that blogs allow dispersed writers, such as those taking courses online, to read and respond to each other's posts and build communal dialogue despite their geographic distance.

Constructive and Interactive E-Zines

While blogs are often written in the first-person and intended to advance a personal opinion or reflection, e-zines are digital versions of magazines, complete with editorial calendars and articles that aspire or adhere to journalistic standards. It's entirely possible to encourage students to construct their own e-zines, or for instructors to curate an e-zine across multiple terms, with each cohort of students becoming the next set of editors and reporters. This is exactly what Robert Samuels has done at UCLA with *The Daily Brewin* e-zine. His students, who function as e-zine writers, editors, and readers, directly link their e-zine articles to those of their peers. According to Samuels, "they are motivated to closely read each other's articles and locate the places where their own work links up to other students' work."

E-zines also create the opportunity – indeed the necessity – to engage students in specific and authentic roles: establishing an editorial calendar, prioritizing and categorizing stories; determining design and layout; and conducting rounds of reviews and copyediting. These roles foster active, constructive, and interactive cognitive processes and provide unique opportunities for students to function in diverse and real-world ways, helping them to realize that they may have aptitudes and interests in certain areas. Contributing to an e-zine enables students to write about issues relevant to their lives; negotiate different viewpoints; conduct deeper, meaningful peer reviews; and practice digital citation.

Constructive and Interactive Social Media

Social media provides perhaps the most obvious opportunities for constructive and interactive activities. Everyday students everywhere produce and post their own videos, photos, and other multimedia artifacts for their networks. These students are actively engaged in rhetorical processes – generating, sharing, and responding to media – with little need for encouragement or guidance. Indeed, this active participation is one the benefits of social media sites, according to Sarah Arroyo, author of "The Medium Is the Medium: Heuretic Writing with Digital Movies." Arroyo stresses the participatory nature of social media, noting, "Users must participate in the site to learn about it…*participation* is required" (247). This participation is at the very heart of constructive and interactive cognitive modes, where participating with others supports learning. Social media sites are also authentically and necessarily public – a key component of writing for an authentic audience. "Making digital writing public is crucial," she writes, "I cannot imagine digital writing in the 'real' world that is not public, so all of students' works should be made public in some manner" (250).

While Arroyo encourages her students to produce digital movies and post them to public forums, Connie Snyder Mick asks her students to produce audio essays

for National Public Radio's series *This I Believe* (231). Whether for YouTube or NPR, these digital artifacts are taken seriously by students precisely because they are released and shared publicly. These videos and podcasts offer opportunities for collaboration, analysis, reflection, and response. Students can collaborate on the production, whether it's dividing the tasks of scripting, directing, producing, and editing a video or serving as interviewer and subject on a podcast. Students can then reflect on how they came to select that subject and how their viewpoints may have changed throughout the process. Finally, they can evaluate how their production was received by reviewing the comments and analytics.

The Constructive and Interactive Classroom

By engaging students in blogging, e-zines, and social media, instructors are beginning to leverage Mueller's digital underlife – the texting, posting, checking, liking, sharing, and responding that all too often becomes a distraction in many courses. Mueller urges composition instructors to develop an understanding of the purposes and functions of these technologies; find ways to support multiple, nonconventional attention structures rather than trying to suppress them; and integrate digital underlife into curricula (248-249).

By embracing interactive cognitive activities, instructors can begin to make a place for many of the activities that they may have tried to suppress in the past. In fact, instructors can transform their classrooms into collaborative lab spaces, where students become co-designers, authors, editors, and avid readers, supporting one another to produce public artifacts and then checking their response rates. This approach can fundamentally change the tenor of a course, from a group of separated students to a lively group of interactive colleagues.

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE GETTING STARTED

When implementing a curriculum that requires digital writing using affinity spaces, there are four important considerations to be taken into account prior to student engagement. These considerations include: learner outcomes; student comfort; public vs. private information; and universal design for learning and accessibility. First, it's important to adopt these approaches not out of novelty or a well-intended desire to engage students; rather, instructors must design these instructional experiences to meet their learning outcomes. Taking time to consider how each type of

affinity space, and its constructive or interactive activities, will further one's disciplinary, institutional, or departmental outcomes is critical.

Second, it's necessary to fully understand students' comfort with digital technologies, their access to digital devices, and their familiarity with various affinity spaces. Having each student write a digital literacy narrative can be a powerful way for them to reflect on each of these areas and for instructors to better understand which students may be unfamiliar, unwilling, or uncomfortable engaging in certain types of activities. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe write extensively on the topic of digital literacy narratives and their immense value helping students and instructors understand the technological contexts within which students live.

Third, many students today lack a thorough understanding of the consequences of sharing information, ideas, and opinions publicly. Prior to any genuinely public discourse, it's important to help students understand what may be inadvisable to share publicly and how to protect themselves from the consequences of making their work public (including the potential socio-emotional and career consequences).

Finally, writing instructors must carefully consider how incorporating digital technologies into their courses may privilege certain students and complicate the work of others – in particular students with physical or cognitive disabilities, students with cultural or language challenges, and students who lack technical confidence. Thus, it may be helpful for instructors to create alternate assignments, alternate roles, or accommodations to be sure that their courses are universally accessible for all learners.

ENTERING A "DIGITAL COMMONS"

Today, it's possible for learners to construct digitally connected experiences faster than ever with greater acuity and expertise. Students can engage directly with their audiences; analyze their view and response rates; and determine how their writing has been received. Students can construct digital artifacts that are useful for them beyond their courses, and can draw connections among courses. Indeed, students can construct a social network comprised of classmates from each course and curate their learning as they develop their own ideas and points-of-view. Perhaps this is the most accurate depiction of Gee's affinity space, and of the deeply interactive work that Chi and Wylie describe.

Students spend substantial amounts of their own time engaged in creating digital artifacts for the affinity

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spaces to which they belong. Sorapure emphasizes that digital spaces are attractive to digital natives, promote critical thinking around software and media, provide generative opportunities for students to participate in their work, and allow student creations to be consumed by real audiences (60). Writing instructors can leverage these spaces – in particular in online courses – to foster both social presence and interactive cognitive activity, and therefore help students feel more engaged in the course and foster learning.

Moreover, by making students' affinity spaces an extension of the course itself, the writing course becomes a trans-affinity space in which students produce and critically evaluate digital artifacts that they and their peers have authored, revised, and published. Not only are students more engaged in multimodal rhetorical processes, but also that very process and their roles as authors have become far more authentic due to the public nature and embedded audiences within these affinity spaces. In many ways, affinity spaces allow instructors to create a "digital commons" and to bring their courses outside, into these commons, where students are already congregating.

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