

The Confluence: Process Theory, Contact Zones, and Online Composition

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Abstract: I look at the utilization of online discussion forums in composition classes. The implementation of new technology is significantly changing the look of writing classrooms, in particular, in a way that works to both the students' and the school's advantage. Basic ideas of composition theory, including process theory and the contact zone, are better implemented through online technology in a meaningful and lasting way.

Introduction

What defines formal writing? How does academic writing differ from writing for other contexts? How do we pass along the instruction of formal, academic writing to students who have heard conflicting definitions about these terms, if they've received any instruction at all?

These questions probe to the very root of composition theory. They shape practice in writing classrooms, and the governing pedagogies behind those practices. But while there may be nothing new about the questions above, the influx of technology in the classroom has made them even harder to answer. Rapidly evolving technology blurs the lines of importance in writing, leaving many instructors groaning at the appearance of text-messaging lingo in freshman comp essays. We wince as proper nouns go uncapitalized in emails from our students or as obvious typos go unheeded in final drafts.

Rather than simply bemoan the loss of grammatical decency due to technology, however, writing programs across the country are realizing the potential for instruction that lies beneath the surface of such technologies. Text messaging is, after all, a form of writing, and if you can find students who are active text messengers, you have also found active writers, at least in one broad sense. It would seem that effective composition instruction should move toward embracing the forms that students are already growing comfortable with outside the classroom. The invocation of online writing will capture students' interest, willingness to work, and offer a new opportunity for the learning and development of writing skills.

Important theories in the realm of composition stand to receive a fresh breath of life through new technology, as well. For example, process theory, which asks students to study the "craft, mechanics, rituals, logistics, atmospherics" of writing as an act (Tobin, 2001, p. 3), can benefit in both technique and application through computer-driven

modes. In opposition to product-modeled instruction, which value and grade only finished written products, process theory suggests that each stage of the writing act is valuable and necessary. A majority of composition courses currently rely on at least some stand-bys of process theory, such as drafting and peer evaluation. Computer-generated writing opens the door far wider for the creation process and its possibilities.

I want to use my own experience with technology in the classroom to show how process theory, combined with that of the contact zone, could evolve rapidly using online media, overcoming some of the obstacles it currently faces as a pedagogical tool. Louise Pratt introduced the concept of contact zone, defining it as “a contested space where many discourses and cultures may meet and struggle with each other,” in direct opposition to the idea of a cohesive discourse community which had been proposed by Stanley Fish and other social constructionists in the 1980’s (Harris, 1997, p.117). Rather than coming to agreed-upon conclusions regarding meaning and interpretation in the classroom, which often coincided conveniently with what the teacher’s lesson had planned, contact zone theory posits the possibility for student learning even while each individual disagrees with the next. I believe that online media and communication offers a practical, productive space for that disagreement.

The Class and The Concept

In the fall quarter of 2006, I received the opportunity to teach two sections of a course that I had not taught before at Highline Community College, located in Des Moines, Washington. The course, Writing 105, is a second-level freshman-composition course that focuses specifically on researched, argumentative essays. It builds upon Writing 101, which is a portfolio-driven composition course designed to cover a wide range of purposes and audiences in writing. I took advantage of this new course to implement a tool that I hadn’t had much chance to explore yet: Blackboard. This program is widely used across the country as an academic tool. It offers an on-line extension to the classroom, or in the cases of hybrid and online classes, stands in place of the classroom. I’d seen it demonstrated and taken classes in how to use it, but hadn’t yet brought it into my own classes. In particular, I wanted to harness the power of the Discussion Forum tool and see how I could best apply it to instructing those new to the practice of academic research and composition.

One of the primary goals for students who successfully complete Writing 105 is to be able to evaluate research resources critically (“Outcomes”). In order to best take advantage of technology and offer a wide variety of readings to my students over the course of the quarter, I asked each student to find an article on the web that was about a subject of personal interest to him or her. Each student then emailed to me a link to that article within the first week of the course. I used those links to construct a reading list, and over the course of the next seven weeks of the quarter we read two of those articles per week.

Each Discussion Forum (accessed through Blackboard) contained a link to a particular article. I posed one or two questions pertaining to the material contained in the article as

the foundation of the forum. Each student was required to provide a one hundred- to two hundred-word response that directly answered the questions. In addition, each student also had to reply to at least two other classmates' postings that week, following up on the thoughts or ideas posed therein.

Discussion threads were open for a week each. Students had from Saturday morning until the next Friday night to make all three posts. We would discuss the week's articles in class during the middle of the week, so that everyone would have had a chance to read the articles assigned, even if they hadn't yet posted to the online discussion.

These discussion forums constituted the majority of my students' homework for the quarter, together with various paper assignments.

Process Theory and the Discussion Forum

In order to get a full sense of how valuable the course's use of Blackboard was for the students, I administered a voluntary survey about eight weeks into the quarter (See Appendix A). Along with answering thirteen multiple-choice and short answer questions, I asked them to provide a sample of electronic writing that they had done for another purpose beyond this class. I received eight responses between my two sections of the course, and I believe that these eight are representative of the attitudes and experiences of the larger group. They cover a spectrum of age, prior experience with technology, and goals for completing their education.

Of the eight respondents, five concluded that the work in the Forums was "more valuable" and two said it was of "equal value" than other homework. All eight declared themselves "satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with the Discussion Forum as an instructional tool.

From what I can tell of survey responses and in-class remarks from the students, the Discussion Forums seem to succeed in their purpose of kick-starting critical thinking. They even seem to enjoy the exercise; comparative to other work they've been assigned.

One explanation for that might come from the answers I received to the survey questions asking them to describe the process they followed to write and submit these posts. While the term "Process" for composition instructors conjures ideas of prewriting, drafting, revising, and the like, I saw no allusion to those concepts in their replies. Some variation occurs as to when the students read, write their original replies to the Forum questions, and write their responses to other students' posts, but on the whole it seems to be a pretty reflexive action for most of them. They read, they write, they respond. No one mentions drafts, or editing responses. Blackboard does have a feature to edit your posts after they have been submitted; to my knowledge, this only occurred once or twice in all of the roughly 1500 posts that were made over the quarter. If a remark was unclear to other students, the original poster often made a follow-up comment to help clarify the point rather than change the original. This, arguably, is still a form of revision, but most students didn't view it as such.

The Performance Factor

H.R.'s response to the Discussion Forums was this: "I like the way we are doing it because it allows us to read what our classmates are writing." His comment echoes one of the most effective elements that I saw emerge over the course of the quarter.

Typically, students see little of one another's writing as the term progresses. Process theory invites peer review, and many composition classrooms incorporate at least some level of peer response into the curriculum at certain points in the term. That work typically pertains to essay drafts, however, and so allows a peek only at one another's more formal academic writing attempts. Any more informal, day-to-day writing (homework, class work, journal entries) remains a dialogue between teacher and individual student only.

In the Discussion Forums, all entries posted were viewable by every member of the course. In addition to being open to review, each student also realized that any comment posted was likely to be built upon by his or her peers.

One factor that technology in general has brought to the forefront is rhetorical concept of audience awareness. Academic writing supposes an audience for most freshman composition essays that will never actually materialize: a student may direct her argumentative essays to a defined audience of parents of preschoolers; however, on the practical side of things, she knows that no one is ever likely to read that argument and take it seriously outside of the instructor for the course. Thus, academic writing has historically been a matter of figuring out "what the teacher wants," and composing to that.

Since so much written communication is virtually instantaneous, students and writers in general have become much more savvy in shaping their texts to a desired audience. There is a sense of differentiation between private writing—text messages, personal emails, instant messages—and public writing—discussion forums, wikis, personal web pages and blogs. It would seem that part of our mission as effective composition instructors is to teach students an association between academic writing and other forms of public writing. Successful composition is far more than "what the teacher wants," and a spectrum of *real* audience members and a sample of their responses is possible, and practical, through online communication.

Contact Zones Examined

As noted earlier, one of the more recent threads to emerge in composition theory is the idea of the contact zone. Pratt's use of contact zone makes use of differences in student populations to aid instruction. Jeffrey Maxson builds on these ideas of contact zone in his essay "'Government of da Peeps, for da Peeps, and by da Peeps': Revisiting the Contact Zone." He shows us how students can embrace academic discourse in order to critique it; in essence, his assignments for his students encourage conflict by abutting two

distinct forms of communication. He defines his students' native language as that which they use in everyday communication, primarily verbal, and which includes slang. He then forces this in juxtaposition with academic language, the discourse found in his university, peer reviewed journals, and published texts from the course materials. This specific application of language conflicts gives a sense of how critical thinking skills emerge organically when students are given room to play with form (2005, p. 24-47). I believe that online composition invites similar opportunities for learning and interaction between native language and academic language, as I hope to show below.

My teaching experiences at Highline Community College have allowed me a glimpse of the practical application of the contact zone, to be sure. HCC's student population is self-described as roughly 70% non-native English speakers, comprising first- or second-generation immigrants from all over the globe. Even among native English speakers, there is a high level of diversity in factors such as race, religion, ethnicity, and economic background. For many students, the only thing they have in common with one another is their shared college experience. There is, therefore, huge potential for the contact zone to arise from readings and potentially to dominate in-class discussions.

Joseph Harris devotes the closing chapter and a closely-related Afterword of his book, *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, to the idea of community and the contact zone. He praises the concept, but expresses concern over some aspects of the theory, because to him, Pratt's ideas are missing "a sense of how competing perspectives can be made to intersect and inform each other" (1997, p.119). He goes on to posit that in most disagreements that occur, battle lines are drawn and positions are taken with little chance of give and take. All sides may be given voice, but no resolution or open evaluation of positions has a chance to occur. He writes,

Such experiences have helped convince me that something is missing from a view of teaching which suggests we simply need to bring people out of their various "safe houses" and into a "contact zone," and that is a sense of how to make such a meeting of differences less like a battle field and more like a negotiation. (1997, p.120)

It's my position that interactive communication in the classroom, through Discussion Forums and similar means, is a valuable way of establishing that negotiation.

I offer an example by way of evidence. One article my evening section struggled with towards the end of our Forums was entitled "Expansion of Consciousness." This piece, a part of the BrainMeta.com website, argues in part that

The evolution and expansion of consciousness is inevitable.... Old philosophies and religions suddenly appear naive and give way to a far more profound understanding. Most religions and philosophies will not last long, simply because it is inevitable that a profound transformation in our consciousness, in our way of understanding and interacting with reality, is going to soon take place. (2006)

Many in the class contested this idea of religion not being a viable path to consciousness expansion¹. In particular, Marlee set forth in one of the earliest posts on this forum that

The Bible addresses these same themes time and time again. Yes, the Bible. One of those religious things that should have disappeared with all this evolution of consciencousness. It is a 3000 year old book and still around. Yet, if you read it, you will be astounded at how similar humankind was back then to us today. The Bible does not gloss over any of our failings but sheds a microscope on the reality of how lame we really are. We have not evolved as claimed. We just live in a different looking box is all. And no amount of consciousness raising evolution is going to change that.

Adam picked up the gauntlet, and countered, as part of a much longer post: “Indeed, the Bible should have disappeared by now. It is a wonder (and an embarrassment) that it hasn’t. Humankind is the same because of the context in which most view the world, one bound by the UNCHANGING dogma of the worlds (great?!?!) religions.”

Marlee and Adam continued this thread of debate over religion the entire week, and, at points, the posts edged on hostility. Other students chimed in on one side or the other. I chose not to moderate directly in the forums by blocking anyone’s participation, a decision I questioned after reading a couple of choicely-worded posts. However, after a total of thirteen posts by Marlee, and twenty-one by Adam, a peace was brokered.

Marlee: “I want to apologize for my comment about Hitler. That was a low blow. With all your talk about superior and inferior and down with religion, it just reminded me of how Hitler used those same words and thoughts to raise up people who would seek and destroy all their inferiors....can we shake hands on Tuesday? Your move.”

Adam: “You are correct, my initial intentions were not hostile though they definitely (and admittedly) seem that way....My hand will be outstretched. Just dont leave me hanging.”

Marlee and Adam both applied themselves to this debate in ways that went far beyond the minimum required for the weekly grade. Obviously, something larger was at stake in this discussion for each of them. The entire class commented as much about the Discussion Forum debate as about the article itself the following class period. All agreed it was valuable to hold such a potentially inflammatory debate in a written form. It allowed them time to plan their thoughts and outline all the points they wanted to cover. Each individual got to say his or her piece without fear of interruption. Tempers obviously flared during some of the posts, but all of us agreed that the online postings removed the immediateness of confrontation, and allowed not just Marlee and Adam, but everyone involved, to think through each side’s positions and to reach a point of mutual understanding between the two.

Online Composition As “Writing”—Conclusions

One further piece of feedback garnered from the surveys I administered was the word “informal.” The students surveyed used this word repeatedly to describe their posts in the forums this quarter, and also the other online writing they do in general. The goal of many freshman composition courses, of course, is almost the exact opposite: we aim to instruct *formal* writing, academic discourse.

However, I don’t think that this implies that we are not succeeding in this goal when we incorporate technology into the classroom. I think the matter here is ultimately one of perception. The students view writing in the discussion forums as informal, I presume, largely because such surface-level constraints like syntax, grammar, and spelling are downplayed. I would, on the other hand, view the critical thinking, development of existing ideas, and generation of new ideas—all of which thrived in my classes’ participation in the Discussion Forums—as the larger goals of formal academic discourse.

Syntax, grammar, and spelling are all essential skills in the craft of writing. I am not suggesting that we ignore them. I *am* suggesting that we view these lower-order concerns in their proper context. If we orient such online writing activities that took place in the Forums as early-stage process writing, then it becomes natural that the emphasis turns on content, rather than correctness. Viewing online posts as brainstorming, prewriting, or even early drafting means that the students are on the path to developing long-lasting writing skills. It will remain a task of the individual instructor that invites technology into the classroom to use it as a springboard, moving the class into higher-level essay assignments that result from the online work that they do.²

Notes

- 1) All students’ writing samples provided in this essay are verbatim. Any mistakes in spelling, punctuation, formatting, or meaning were left as they appeared in the original writing sample.
- 2) For the purposes of this paper submission, I have omitted the Appendices. These included a blank copy of the survey I gave, along with each of the filled out responses referred to in the text. I also transcribed the full version of the two Discussion Forum threads mentioned directly in the essay. I will be glad to provide any or all of this material if it is deemed necessary.

References

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Appendix A

Survey Draft

Name: _____ Major: _____
 I prefer to remain anonymous

This survey is intended to evaluate your reaction and impression of WRIT 105's Discussion Board requirement using BlackBoard. Please feel free to answer all questions openly and honestly—nothing you say here will affect your course grade in any way.

- 1) How would you describe the **quantity** of work required to fulfill each Discussion Forum assignment?
 Too Little About Right Too Much

- 2) How would you describe the **difficulty** of work required of Discussion Forum assignments compared to more traditional homework assignments?
 Easier About the Same Harder

- 3) How would you describe the **value** of work required of Discussion Forum assignments compared to more traditional homework assignments?
 Less valuable Equal value More valuable

- 4) How do you feel the Discussion Forum impacts or contributes to in-class discussion?

- 5) Do you typically post responses before or after class discussion of the topics, or a combination of the two?
 Before After Combination

- 6) Please rank your overall satisfaction of the Discussion Forum process as an instruction tool. (Mark only one.)
 completely unsatisfied somewhat unsatisfied neutral
 somewhat satisfied completely satisfied

- 7) How would you characterize your overall writing style in the Discussion Forum? (Mark as many as apply.)
 sloppy hurried thoughtful formal well proofread
 informal organized responsive independent not proofread
 other: _____

- 8) What other types of online writing do you do on a regular basis? (Mark as many as apply.)
 email chat forums discussion postings (non-academic)
 blogs personal webpages (MySpace, etc.) text-based game playing
 other: _____

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9) How would you characterize your typical online writing style? (Mark as many as apply.)

- sloppy hurried thoughtful formal well proofread
 informal organized responsive independent not proofread
 other: _____

***Please attach a sample of your online writing to this survey.

✪ May I use examples of your Discussion Forum postings in my own writing? (I will refer to you by first name only.) yes no

✪ May I use examples of your other online writing in my own writing? (Again, using only your first name, and not including references made to other people by name at all.)
 yes no