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New Directions in the Teaching of Writing

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### Composition 2.0: Capitalism in the Digital Writing Space

In the world of composition, we are moving towards the age of digital and multimodal composing. Today's university composition courses are filled with the various technologies that students use to compose in the classroom. Living in the digital writing era with programs such as Wix, WordPress, and Google Docs our students are composing digitally now more than ever.

When they compose using these free online entities we have to remember they are bombarded with advertisements and the capitalistic nature that plagues our new modern society. Since "high-speed global communication networks" that our students are using every day have been "directly linked to the spread of multinational capitalism", how can we in our now "digital" classroom use our power as teachers to address the use of media in our composing pedagogy (Selfe). The term "media literacy" means "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media" (Bazant). Now that composition classes are filling with media "literate youth and adults" teachers have to accept that "commercially biased media isn't going anywhere because it's already everywhere" (Carmichael). Cynthia Selfe argues that these new digital environments give "political identities" that people use in "literacy practices in online exchange environments" and "in various forms of new media texts." The argument from Carmichael, Selfe, and many others in the composition world is that though we as compositionists fear the discussion of media in our classrooms, we can use media literacy to rhetorically analyze the capitalistic nature of these digital mediums and

create pedagogical “skills they can use beyond the walls of the classroom” (Carmichael). In understanding this need for media literacy in the composition classroom we must first address the notion that “the principles of writing for the Web are driven, first and foremost, by commercial interests and Western capitalist ideology” (Payne).

Since James Berlin published his essay “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” the composition field has been drenched in anti-capitalistic ideology which seeks to use the writing class as an ideology deconstruction platform. This same ideology is what hides behind the anti-digital classroom design. We bring our students to the web where “readers” are defined as “consumers”, and as Payne would argue create a discourse which is spearheaded by large corporations which control our main access to the internet. Payne argues that his students use a template system similar to Wix, Wiki-How and WordPress which integrate “commercial advertising in the layout” which has become the “new cultural capital online.” In his conclusion, Payne finishes by stating that “working from below” can help students “negotiate the dynamic on the Web” against the constructed “public sphere that encourages homogeneity in discourse.” Payne’s radical view of the Web as a commercial entity, though exaggerated, cannot be denied in the overload of media we are subjugated to when composing on a website such as Wiki-How. Yet, the power of writing with a community online cannot be dismissed as completely and inherently capitalistic, not when it has the ability to “exchange ideas and form interest groups” which can allow students to question their social construct along with others is discussion (Selfe).

Cynthia Selfe, notes on the contrary that our “single-minded focus on conventional alphabetic text-which generally comprise the officially sanctioned literacy in our contemporary society” only show the homogeneous commercialism of our current academic discourse

language. In Selfe's writing on New Media in the composition class, she discusses the democratic properties that are available to students who write using visual rhetoric. By discovering new literacy, our students bring to class "literacies practiced in the home, the community, the church, and online;...literacies based in multiple languages, cultures, and contexts" (Selfe). This democracy comes from students who are wildly tech savvy and can help teachers to learn from their students. Students who could help us to "expand our conception of literacy to beyond that of single official version of reading and writing, but it may also help change the dynamic around literacy studies altogether, encouraging,...teacher-students with student-teachers" (Selfe). Though Selfe does note early in her text the consumer intent of the WWW she does not address advertising which is also present in these democratic medias. Much like Selfe's article on the importance of digital writing in the classroom Lorie Jacob's published article: "They Blog, Therefore They Think: Composition 2.0 and Blogging toward Democracy," highlights more of the democratic view of writing and language on the generation of the social media gurus.

In Jacob's article she instantly notes that most scholars in the teaching field are currently obsessed with this "Face-book generation", and keep trying to "read [their] thinking and writing." The issue that some academics have with this topic is that it is creating a "society even more alienated" and therefore not moving into the democratic society needed in composition classes. Jacob's argument is that the "social networking capabilities of the internet, specifically blogs and wikis, Facebook and Twitter, have the potential to foster critical thinking and writing". Instead of the consumer driven society feared by Payne, "the rise of social media signals a transition to a post-consumerist salon culture of discussion and collaboration in a true public sphere" (Jacobs). Jacobs warns on media literacy in the classroom: "without conscious

examination and critical engagement we risk leaving next generations to fend for themselves surrounded by media wolves.” “By embracing the potential of social media within academic contexts, specifically first-year composition, we have the opportunity to shape new media and consciously engage students as emerging public intellectuals.” Jacob’s boasts that her article is the new Marxist reimagining of the First-Year Composition course, “a digital manifesto.” The article “demonstrates the potential for politico-cultural engagement for this generation,” and how that democratic power is used through digital writing. “I suggest the more critical engagement and academic direction we give students in using online interactive medium, the more consciously involved they become in that medium.” Therefore, by addressing media in our students’ digital sphere, we make them aware of the capitalistic nature that is attached to their democratic writing space. By taking the pros and cons of using digital writing spaces in the classroom, we are able to address our students as intellectuals who can use a consumer space while conscience of its true purpose. This critical thinking or media literacy allows students to create digital media while also analyzing its use by corporate companies.

In Misty Carmichael’s article “Teaching Media Literacy in the Composition Classroom: Are We There Yet?” she wishes to deal with both of these issues by “addressing consumer culture and showing students how to interpret capitalist ideologies in a social context.” By analyzing media in the digital space we can have our students think critically about their writing environment’s evolution. Carmichael addresses this need by noting “Americans’ insatiable consumption” and it’s “result of students’ inability to read media messages with a discerning eye.” As the use of personal computers at home has become the norm, composition has yet to tackle the issue of media in our culture and ideology of our students. Yet, as Carmichael states this reluctance of media discussion in the composition class comes from deep-seeded classical

views much like Payne's. These outdated fears of digital media in the composition classroom come from our fields former dabbling in Marxism. "Teaching media literacy is crucial to understanding the various ubiquitous texts-turned visuals in our culture, including but definitely not limited to sitcoms, advertisements, animated series and movies" (Carmichael). The fear of digital writing environments in the composition classroom needs to be addressed by teaching our students media literacy and its importance when using consumer based writing tools on the internet. These skills can be used by students even when outside of the classroom to decipher their internet environment experience.

When Berlin's essay originally entered the field it theory changed "from process to critique", and now digital writing spaces in composition are transforming it from "critical analysis to design" (Marback). I believe that Marback's description of the composition field's change to digital is more of a merge of critical analysis and design. Though Payne introduced the issues within a consumer/capitalistic writing website, I believe that we can introduce these ideas when designing through these websites. Payne's observations of our generation are backed by even Selfe's admittance of the consumer nature of the WWW. Yet, Selfe is able to prove the democratic need for digital writing in the composition classroom. By using this online democracy, we can create what Lorie Jacobs describes as "public intellectuals." These public intellectuals in our course can use the media literacy presented by Misty Carmichael to critique the advertisements that they see on writing/design websites as well as social media. By allowing our students to critique the modes that we use in our own writing classes we give them their own power in reflecting on capitalist media that is all around them. I am currently taking a course at The University of Akron's graduate program for Composition and Rhetoric titled "New Directions in The Teaching of Writing". Within this course we are able to design writing in

digital consumer spaces such as Wiki-How, while addressing the advertisements that bombard you as the designer. Our look at digital writing as both powerful and limited allowed us to critically examine the tools we used during this class. As we “venture with them toward a revised version of critical thinking pedagogy” we will look to reinvent ourselves and as Jacobs calls it, and become “Composition 2.0”

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